THE WORLD'S LEADING MYSTERY MAGAZINE

ELLERY QUEEN'S Mystery Magazine

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JANUARY 1972 75¢

ALL-NEW ISSUE
15 NEW stories

Miriam Allen deFord

David Ely

John Pierce

Robert Edward Eckels

Joan Richter

James Holding

Alan K. Young

Lloyd Biggle, Jr.

Lika Van Ness

MICHAEL GILBERT

ISAAC ASIMOV

JOE GORES

H. R. F. KEATING

AVRAM DAVIDSON

EDWARD D. HOCH

SHOUT
SHARE
IT

- Ellery Queen's Mystery Magazine, Vol. 59, No. 1. Whole No. 338, January 1972
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  - The Acquisitive Chuckle
  - File #6: Beyond the Shadow
  - The Munich Courier
  - Last Harvest
  - Once a Cop
  - How Could He Do It?
  - The Theft of the Seven Ravens
  - The Borneo Snapshot Mystery
  - Criminalimerick
    - You Know My Methods, Don't You?
  - Mr. Anonymous
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    - Middle-aged Fan's Lament
  - Child's Play
  - Inspector Ghote and the Miracle
  - Grandfather and the Little Bone
  - Turnabout
  - No Time to Lose
  - Mouse in a Trap

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The Acquisitive Chuckle
by Isaac Asimov{©1971 by Isaac Asimov.}

The first of a new series by Isaac Asimov

The first of a brand-new series — about the Black Widowers and the piquant problems that challenged them monthly… In this opening adventure Bartram, the private detective, tells the Black Widowers the details of an old case that the detective had never been able to solve. Could the five members — patent lawyer Geoffrey Avalon, code expert Thomas Trumbull, writer Emmanuel Rubin, organic chemist James Drake, and artist Mario Gonzalo — could they solve the mystery?… Can you?

❖

Hanley Bartram was the guest, that night, of the Black Widowers, who met monthly in their quiet haunt and vowed death to any female who intruded — for that one night each month, at any rate.

The number of attendees varied: on this occasion five members were present.

Geoffrey Avalon was host for the evening. He was tall, with a neatly trimmed mustache and a smallish beard, more white than black now, but with hair as black as ever.

As host it was his duty to deliver the ritual toast that marked the beginning of the dinner proper. Loudly, and with gusto, he said, "To Old King Cole of sacred memory. May his pipe be forever lit, his bowl forever full, his fiddlers forever in health, and may we all be as merry as he all our lives long."

The six cried "Amen," touched lips to drink, and sat down. Avalon put his drink to the side of his plate. It was his second and was now exactly half full. It would remain there throughout the dinner and not be touched again. He was a patent lawyer and he carried over into his social life the minutiae of his work. One and one-half drinks was precisely what he allowed himself on these occasions.

Thomas Trumbull came storming up the stairs at the last minute, with his usual cry of "Henry, a Scotch and soda for a dying man!"

Henry, the waiter at these functions for several years now (and with no last name that any Black Widower had ever heard used), had

the Scotch and soda ready. He was sixtyish but his face was unwrinkled and staid. His voice seemed to recede into the distance even as he spoke. “Right here, Mr. Trumbull.”

Trumbull spotted Bartram at once and said to Avalon in an aside, “Your guest?”

“He asked to come,” said Avalon, in as near a whisper as he could manage. “Nice fellow. You’ll like him.”

The dinner itself went as miscellaneously as the Black Widowers’ affairs usually did. Emmanuel Rubin, who had the other beard — a thin and scraggly one under a mouth with widely spaced teeth — had broken out of a writer’s block and was avidly giving the details of the story he had just finished. James Drake, with a rectangular face, a mustache but no beard, was interrupting with memories of other stories, tangentially related. Drake was an organic chemist but he had an encyclopedic knowledge of pulp fiction.

Trumbull, as a code expert, considered himself to be in the inner councils of government and took it into his head to be outraged at Mario Gonzalo’s political pronouncements. “Damn it,” he yelled, in one of his less vituperative moods, “why don’t you stick to your idiotic collages and burlap bags and leave world affairs to your betters?”

Trumbull had not recovered from Gonzalo’s one-man art show earlier that year, and Gonzalo, understanding this, laughed good-naturedly, saying, “Show me my betters. Name one.”

Bartram, short and plump, with hair that curled in tiny ringlets, clung firmly to his role as guest. He listened to everyone, smiled at everyone, and said little.

Eventually the time came when Henry poured the coffee and placed the desserts before each guest with practised legerdemain. It was at this moment that the traditional grilling of the guest usually began.

The first interrogator, almost by tradition, was Thomas Trumbull. His swarthy face, wrinkled into perennial discontent, looked angry as he began with the invariable opening question: “Mr. Bartram, how do you justify your existence?”

Bartram smiled. He spoke with precision as he said, “I have never tried. My clients, on those occasions when I give satisfaction, find my existence justified.”

“Your clients?” said Rubin. “What is it you do, sir?”

“I am a private detective.”

“Good,” said James Drake. “I don’t think we’ve ever had one before. — Mannie, you can get some of the procedures correct for a change when you write your private-eye stuff.”

“Not from me,” Bartram said quickly.

Trumbull scowled. “If you don’t mind, gentlemen, as the

appointed grillster please leave this to me. — Mr. Bartram, you speak of the occasions on which you give satisfaction. Do you always give satisfaction?"

"There are times when the matter can be debated," said Bartram. "In fact, I would like to speak to you this evening concerning an occasion that was particularly questionable. It may even be that one of you might be useful in that connection. It was with this in mind that I asked my good friend, Jeff Avalon, to invite me to a meeting, once I learned the details of your organization. He obliged and I am delighted."

"Are you ready now to discuss this dubious satisfaction you gave or did not give, as the case may be?"

"Yes, if you will allow me."

Trumbull looked at the others for signs of dissent. Gonzalo's prominent eyes were fixed on Bartram as he said, "May we interrupt?" Quickly, and with an admirable economy of strokes, he was doodling a caricature of Bartram on the back of a menu card. It would join the others which memorialized guests and which marched in brave array across the walls.

"Within reason," said Bartram. He paused to sip at his coffee and then said, "The story begins with Anderson, to whom I shall refer only in that fashion. He was an acquisitor."

"An inquisitor?" Gonzalo asked, frowning.

"An *ac*quisitor. He acquired things, he earned them, he bought them, he picked them up, he collected them. The world moved in one direction with respect to him — it moved toward him, never away. He had a house into which this flood of material, of varying value, came to rest and never moved again. Through the years it grew steadily thicker and more amazingly heterogeneous. — He also had a business partner, whom I shall call Jackson."

Trumbull interrupted, frowning, not because there was anything to frown about, but because he always frowned. He said, "Is this a true story?"

"I tell only true stories," Bartram said slowly and precisely. "I lack the imagination to lie."

"Is it confidential?"

"I shall tell the story in such a way as to make it difficult to be recognized; but if it were recognized, it would be confidential."

"I follow the subjunctive," said Trumbull, "but I wish to assure you that what is said within the walls of this room is never repeated, or referred to, outside its walls. Henry understands this, too."

Henry, who was refilling two of the coffee cups, smiled a little and bent his head in agreement.

Bartram smiled also and went on, "Jackson had a disease, too. He

was honest, unavoidably and deeply honest. The characteristic permeated his soul as though, from an early age, he had been marinated in integrity.

"To a man like Anderson it was most useful to have Honest Jackson as a partner, for their business, which I carefully do not describe in detail, required contact with the public. Such contact was not for Anderson, for his acquisitiveness stood in the way. With each object he acquired, another little crease of slyness entered his face, until it seemed a spider's web that frightened all flies at sight. It was Jackson, the pure and the honest, who was the front man, and to whom all widows hastened with their mites, and orphans with their farthings.

"On the other hand, Jackson also found Anderson a necessity, for Jackson, with all his honesty, perhaps because of it, had no knack for making one dollar become two. Left to himself he would, entirely without meaning to, lose every cent entrusted to him and would then quickly be forced to kill himself as a dubious form of restitution. Anderson's hands were to money, however, as fertilizer is to roses, and together he and Jackson were a winning combination.

"Yet no paradise continues forever, and a besetting characteristic, left to itself, will deepen, widen, and grow more extreme. Jackson's honesty grew to such colossal proportions that Anderson, for all his shrewdness, was occasionally backed to the wall and forced into monetary loss. Similarly, Anderson's acquisitiveness burrowed to such infernal depths that Jackson, for all his morality, found himself occasionally twisted into questionable practices.

"Naturally, as Anderson disliked losing money, and Jackson abhorred losing character, a coolness grew between the two. In such a situation the advantage clearly lay on the side of Anderson, who placed no reasonable limits on his actions, whereas Jackson felt himself bound by a code of ethics.

"Slyly Anderson worked and maneuvered until, eventually, poor honest Jackson found himself forced to sell out his end of the partnership under the most disadvantageous of conditions.

"Anderson's acquisitiveness, we might say, had reached a climax, for he acquired sole control of the business. It was his intention to retire now, leaving its everyday running to employees, and concerning himself no further than was required to pocket its profits. Jackson, on the other hand, was left with little more than his honesty, and while honesty is an admirable characteristic it has small direct value in a hockshop.

"It was at this point, gentlemen, that I entered the picture. — Ah, Henry, thank you."

The glasses of brandy were being passed around.

“You did not know those people to begin with?” Rubin asked, his sharp eyes blinking.

“No,” Bartram said, sniffing delicately at the brandy and just touching it to his upper lip, “though I think one of you in this room did. It was some years ago.

“I first met Anderson when he entered my office in a white heat. ‘I want you to find what I’ve lost,’ he said. I have dealt with many cases of theft in my career and so I asked, naturally, ‘What is it you have lost?’ And he answered, ‘Damn it, man, that’s what I’ve just asked you to find out:’

“The story came out rather raggedly. Anderson and Jackson had quarreled with surprising intensity. Jackson was outraged, as only an honest man can be when he finds that his integrity is no shield against the conniving of others. He swore revenge, and Anderson shrugged that off with a laugh.”

“Beware the wrath of a patient man,” quoted Avalon, with the air of precision-research that he brought to even his least portentous statements.

“So I have heard,” said Bartram, “though I have never had occasion to test the maxim. Nor, apparently, had Anderson, for he had no fear of Jackson. As he explained, Jackson was so psychotically honest and so insanely law-abiding that there was no chance of his slipping into wrongdoing. Or so Anderson thought. It did not even occur to him to ask Jackson to restore the office key — something all the more curious since the office was located in Anderson’s house, among all that knickknackery.

“Anderson recalled this omission a few days after the quarrel when, returning from an early evening appointment, he found Jackson in his house. Jackson carried an attaché case which he was just closing as Anderson entered — closing with startled haste, it seemed to Anderson.

“Anderson frowned and said, ‘What are you doing here?’

“ ‘Returning some papers which were in my possession and which now belong to you,’ said Jackson, ‘and returning the key to the office.’ With this remark he handed over the key, indicated papers on the desk, and pushed the combination lock on his attaché case with fingers that Anderson could swear trembled a little. Jackson looked about the room with what appeared to Anderson to be a curious, almost a secretively satisfied, smile and said, ‘I will now leave.’ And he proceeded to do so.

“It was not until Anderson heard the motor of Jackson’s car whirring into action and then retreating into the distance that he could rouse himself from a kind of stupor that had paralyzed him. He knew he had been robbed and the next day he came to me.”

Drake pursed his lips, twirled his half-empty brandy glass, and said, “Why not to the police?”

“There was a complication,” said Bartram. “Anderson did not know what had been taken. When the certainty of theft dawned on him he naturally rushed to the safe. Its contents were secure. He ransacked his desk. Nothing seemed to be missing. He went from room to room. Everything seemed to be intact as far as he could tell.”

“Wasn’t he certain?” asked Gonzalo.

“He couldn’t be. The house was inordinately crowded with every variety of object and he didn’t remember all his possessions. He told me, for instance, that at one time he collected antique watches. He had them in a small drawer in his study — six of them. All six were there, but he was nagged by the faint memory of having had seven. For the life of him he could not remember definitely. In fact, it was worse than that, for one of the six present seemed strange to him. Could it be that he had had only six but that a less valuable one had been substituted for a more valuable one? Something of this sort repeated itself a dozen times over in every hideaway and with every sort of oddment. So he came to me—”

“Wait a while,” interrupted Trumbull, bringing his hand down hard on the table. “What made him so certain that Jackson had taken anything at all?”

“Ah,” said Bartram, “that is the fascinating part of the story. The closing of the attaché case, and Jackson’s secretive smile as he looked about the room, served to rouse Anderson’s suspicions, but as the door closed behind him, Jackson chuckled. It was not an ordinary chuckle — but I’ll let Anderson tell it in his own words, as nearly as I can remember them.

“ ‘Bartram,’ he said, ‘I have heard that chuckle innumerable times in my life. I have chuckled that way myself a thousand times. It is a characteristic chuckle, an unmistakable one, an unmaskable one. It is the acquisitive chuckle; it is the chuckle of a man who has just obtained something he wants very much at the expense of someone else. If any man in all the world knows that chuckle and can recognize it, even behind a closed door, that man is myself. I cannot be mistaken. Jackson had taken something of mine and was glorying in it!’

“There was no arguing with the man on this point. He virtually slavered at the thought of having been victimized and, indeed, I had to believe him. I had to suppose that for all Jackson’s pathological honesty he had finally been lured, by the once-in-a-lifetime snapping of patience, into theft. Helping to lure him must have been his knowledge of Anderson. He must have known Anderson’s intent hold on even the least valued of his belongings, and realized that the hurt

would extend far deeper and far beyond the value of the object taken, however great that value might have been.

"There you have the problem. Anderson wanted me to find out what had been taken, for until he could identify a stolen object and show that that object was, or had been, in the possession of Jackson, he could not prosecute — and he was most intent on prosecution. My task, then, was to look through his house and tell him what was missing."

"How would that be possible, if he himself couldn't tell?" growled Trumbull.

"I pointed that out to him," said Bartram, "but he was wild and unreasoning. He offered me a great deal of money, win or lose; a very handsome fee, indeed, and he put down a sizable portion of it as a retainer. It was clear he resented beyond measure the deliberate insult to his acquisitiveness. The thought that an amateur non-acquisitor like Jackson should dare beard him in the most sacred of his passions had driven him, on this one point, mad, and he was prepared to go to any expense to keep the other's victory from being final.

"I, too, am human. So I accepted the retainer and the fee. After all, I reasoned, I had my methods. — I took up the question of insurance lists first. All were outdated, but they served to eliminate the furniture and all the larger items as possible objects of Jackson's thievery; for everything on the lists was still in the house."

Avalon said, "They were eliminated anyway, since the stolen object would have had to fit into the attaché case."

"Provided that it was the attaché case that was used to transport the item out of the house," Bartram pointed out patiently. "The attaché case might easily have been a decoy. Prior to Anderson's return, Jackson could have had a moving van at the door and taken out the grand piano had he so chosen, and then snapped the attaché case in Anderson's face to mislead him.

"But never mind that. I agree it wasn't likely. I took him around the house room by room, following a systematic procedure of considering the floor, walls, and ceiling, studying all the shelves, opening every door of every piece of furniture, going through every closet. Nor did I neglect the attic and the basement. Never before had Anderson been forced to consider every item of his vast and amorphous collection in order that somewhere, somehow, some item would jog his memory of some companion item that was *not* there.

"It was an enormous house, a heterogeneous one, an endless one. It took us days, and poor Anderson grew more befuddled each day.

"I next tackled it from the other end. It was obvious that Jackson had deliberately taken something unnoticeable, probably small; certainly something that Anderson would not easily miss and therefore

something to which he was not greatly attached. On the other hand, it made sense to suppose that it was something Jackson would *want* to take away, and which he would find valuable. Indeed, his act would give him most satisfaction if Anderson also considered it valuable — once he realized what it was that was gone. What, then, could it be?"

"A small painting," said Gonzalo eagerly, "which Jackson knew to be an authentic Cezanne, but which Anderson thought was junk."

"A postage stamp from Anderson's collection," said Rubin, "which Jackson noted had an error in the engraving." He had once written a story which had hinged on this precise point.

"A book," said Trumbull, "that contained some hidden family secret with which, in due time, Jackson could blackmail Anderson."

"A photograph," said Avalon dramatically, "showing the likeness of an old sweetheart which Anderson would give a large sum to buy back."

"I don't know what business they were in," said Drake thoughtfully, "but it might have been the kind where some unvalued gimcrack might actually be of great value to a competitor and drive Anderson to bankruptcy. I remember one case where a formula for a hydrazo-intermediate—"

"Oddly enough," Bartram broke in firmly, "I thought of each of these possibilities, and I went over each one with Anderson. It was clear that he had no taste in art and such pieces as he had were really junk, and no mistake. He did not collect stamps, and though he had many books and could not tell for certain whether one were gone, he swore he had no family secrets anywhere that were worth the skipped beat of a blackmailer's heart. Nor had he ever had any old sweethearts, since in his younger days he had confined himself to professional ladies whose photographs he did not prize. As for his business secrets, they were of the sort that would interest the government far more than any competitor, and everything of that sort had been kept from Jackson's honest eyes and were still in the safe, or long in the fire. I thought of other possibilities, but one by one they were knocked down.

"Of course, Jackson might betray himself. He might blossom into sudden wealth and in ferreting out the source of the wealth we might learn the identity of the stolen object.

"Anderson himself suggested this and paid lavishly to have a twenty-four-hour watch put on Jackson. It was useless. The man kept a dull way of life and behaved precisely as you would expect someone minus his life savings to behave. He lived parsimoniously and eventually he took a menial job, where his honesty and calm demeanor were desirable assets.

"Finally I had but one alternative left—"

"Wait, wait," said Gonzalo, "let me guess." He tossed off what was left of his brandy and said, "Would any of you care for a cigar?" Only Trumbull reached for one.

Gonzalo lit the cigar, signaled Henry for another brandy, and said, "You asked Jackson what he stole!"

"I was strongly tempted to," said Bartram ruefully, "but that would scarcely have been feasible. It doesn't do in my profession to even hint at an accusation without evidence of any sort. Licenses are too fragile. And in any case he would simply deny theft, if accused, and be put on his guard against any self-incrimination."

"Well, then—" Gonzalo said blankly, and petered out.

The other four furrowed their brows, but only silence ensued.

Bartram, having waited politely, said, "You won't guess, gentlemen, for you are not in the profession. You know only what you read in romances and so you think gentlemen like myself have an unlimited number of alternatives and invariably solve all cases. I, myself, being in the profession, know otherwise. Gentlemen, the one alternative I had left was to confess failure.

"Anderson paid me, however. I'll give him that much credit. By the time I said goodbye to him he had lost some ten pounds. There was a vacant look in his eyes and as he shook hands with me they moved round and round the room he was in, still looking, still searching. He muttered, 'I tell you I couldn't possibly mistake that chuckle. He took something from me. He took something from me.'

"I saw him on two or three later occasions. He never stopped looking; he never found the missing object. He went rather downhill. The events I have described took place nearly five years ago, and last month he died."

There was a short silence. Avalon said, "Without ever finding the missing object?"

"Without ever finding it."

Trumbull said, with disapproval, "Are you coming to us for help with the problem?"

"In a way, yes. The occasion is too good to miss. Anderson is dead and whatever is said within these walls will go no further, we all agree, so that I may now ask what I could not ask before. — Henry, may I have a light, please."

Henry, who had been listening with a kind of absent-minded deference, produced a book of matches and lit Bartram's cigarette.

"Let me introduce you, Henry, to those you so efficiently serve. — Gentlemen, may I introduce to you — Henry Jackson."

There was a moment of clear shock and Drake said, *"The* Jackson."

"Exactly," said Bartram. "I knew he was working here and when I

heard it was at this club that you met for your monthly meetings I had to beg, rather shamelessly, for an invitation. It was only here that I could find the gentleman with the acquisitive chuckle, and do so under conditions of both bonhomie and discretion."

Henry smiled and bent his head.

Bartram said, "There were times during the course of the investigation when I could not help but wonder, Henry, whether Anderson might not have been wrong and whether there might possibly have been no theft at all. Always, however, I returned to the matter of the acquisitive chuckle, and I trusted Anderson's judgment."

"You did right to do so," Henry said softly, "for I *did* steal something from my one-time partner, the gentleman you have referred to as Anderson. And I never regretted the act for a single moment."

"It was something of value, I assume."

"It was of the greatest value and no day has passed without my thinking of the theft and rejoicing in the fact that the wicked man no longer had what I had taken away."

"And you deliberately roused his suspicions in order that you might experience the greater joy."

"Yes, I did."

"And you did not fear being caught?"

"Not for a single moment."

"By God," roared Avalon suddenly. "I say it again. Beware the wrath of a patient man. I am a patient man, but I am tired of this endless cross-examination. Beware my wrath, Henry. What was it you carried off in your attaché case?"

"Why, nothing," said Henry. "The attaché case was empty."

"Heaven help me! Where did you put whatever it was you took from him?"

"I didn't have to put it anywhere."

"Well, then, what did you take?"

"Only his peace of mind," Henry said gently.

File #6: Beyond the Shadow
by Joe Gores{©1971 by Joe Gores.}

A new kind of "procedural" by Joe Gores

Here is one of the most unusual Christmas Eve detective stories we have ever read… In the letter accompanying the original manuscript, the author, Joe Gores, short-story Edgar winner of 1969, wrote: "I tried to write this story on three levels. First, simply as a File Series story about the repossession of a car; second, as a new kind of procedural detective story; and third, as a 'challenge to the reader' (with a bow to E. Q.) in which the final twist, the revelation that explains all, comes in the last three words of the story."

We'll say no more now — but please take the author's challenge seriously. It will add immeasurably to your reading enjoyment… Happy holiday!

❖

Christmas Eve in San Francisco: bright decorations under alternating rain and mist. Despite the weather, the fancy shops ringing Union Square had been jammed with last-minute buyers, and the Santa Claus at Geary and Stockton had long since found a sheltered doorway from which to contemplate his imminent unemployment. Out on Golden Gate Avenue the high-shouldered charcoal Victorian which housed Daniel Kearny Associates was unusually dark and silent. Kearny had sent the office staff home at 2:30; soon after, Kathy Onoda, the Japanese office manager, had departed.

Sometime after 9:00, Giselle Marc stuck her shining blonde head through the open sliding door of Kearny's cubbyhole in the DKA basement.

"You need me for anything more, Dan?"

Kearny looked up in surprise. "I thought I sent you girls home."

"Year-end stuff I wanted a head start on," she said lightly. Giselle was 26, tall and lithe, with a Master's degree in history and all the brains that aren't supposed to go with her sort of looks. That year she had no one special to go home to. "What about you?"

"I've been looking for a handle in that Bannock file for Golden Gate Trust. There's a police A.P.B. out on Myra, the older girl, and since she's probably driving the Lincoln that we're supposed to

repossess—"

"An A.P.B! Why?"

"The younger sister, Ruth, was found today over in Contra Costa County. Shot. Dead. She'd been there for several days."

"And the police think Myra did it?" asked Giselle.

Kearny shrugged. Just then he looked his 44 hard driving years. Too many all-night searches for deadbeats, embezzlers, or missing relatives; too many repossessions after nonstop investigations; too many bourbons straight from too many hotel-room bottles with other men as hard as himself.

"The police want to talk to her, anyway. Some of the places we've had to look for those girls, I wouldn't be surprised at *anything* that either one of them did. The Haight, upper Grant, the commune out on Sutter Street — how can people live like that, Giselle?"

"Different strokes for different folks, Dan'l." She added thoughtfully, "That's the second death in this case in a week."

"I don't follow."

"Irma Carroll. The client's wife."

"She was a suicide," objected Kearny. "Of course, for all we know, so was Ruth Bannock. Anyway, we've got to get that car before the police impound it. That would mean the ninety-day dealer recourse would expire, and the bank would have to eat the car."

He flipped the Bannock file a foot in the air so that it fell on the desk and slewed out papers like a fanned deck of cards. "The bank's deadline is Monday. That gives us only three days to come up with the car."

He shook a cigarette from his pack as he listened to Giselle's retreating heels, lit up, and then waved a hand to dispel the smoke from his tired eyes. A rough week. Rough year, actually, with the state snuffling around on license renewal because of this and that, and the constant unsuccessful search for a bigger office. There was that old brick laundry down on 11th Street for sale, but their asking price…

Ought to get home to Mama and the kids. Instead he leaned back in the swivel chair with his hands locked behind his head to stare at the ceiling in silence. The smoke of his cigarette drifted almost hypnotically upward.

Silence. Unusual at DKA. Usually field men were coming in and going out. Phones were ringing, intercom was buzzing. Giselle or Kathy or Jane Goldson, the Limey wench whose accent lent a bit of class to the switchboard, calling down from upstairs with a hot one. O'Bannon in to bang the desk about the latest cuts in his expense account…

The Bannock Lincoln. Damned odd case. Stewart Carroll, the auto zone man at Golden Gate Trust, had waited three months before even

assigning the car to DKA. That had been last Monday, the 21st. The same night Carroll's wife committed suicide. And now one of the free-wheeling Bannock girls was dead, murdered maybe, in a state park on a mountain in the East Bay. One in the temple, the latest news broadcast had said.

Doubtful that the sister, Myra, had pulled the trigger; if he was looking for a head-roller in the case he'd pick that slick friend of theirs, that real-estate man down on Montgomery Street. Raymond Edwards. Now there was a guy capable of doing anything to…

The sound of the front door closing jerked Kearny's eyes from the sound-proofed ceiling. He could see a man's shadow cast thick and heavy down the garage. It might have belonged to Trinidad Morales, but he'd fired Morales last summer.

The man who appeared in the office doorway *was* built like Morales, short and broad and overweight, with a sleepy, pleasantly tough face. Maybe a couple of years younger than Kearny. Durable-looking. Giselle must have forgotten to set the outside lock.

"You're looking hard for that Bannock Lincoln."

"Any of your business?" asked Kearny almost pleasantly. Not a process server: he would have been advancing with a toothy grin as he reached for the papers to slap on the desk.

"Could be." He sat down unbidden on the other side of the desk. "I'm a cop. Private tin, like you. We were hired by old man Bannock to find the daughters, same day you were hired by Golden Gate Trust to find the car."

Kearny lit another cigarette. Neither Heslip nor Ballard had cut this one's sign, which meant he had to be damned smooth.

"The police found one of the girls," Kearny said.

"Yeah. Ruth. I was over in Contra Costa County when she turned up. Just got back. Clearing in the woods up on Mount Diablo, beside the ashes of a little fire." He paused. "Pretty odd, Stewart Carroll letting that car get right up to the deadline before assigning it out."

"He probably figured old man Bannock would make the payments even though he wasn't on the contract." Then Kearny added, his square hard face watchful, "You have anything that says who you are?"

The stocky man grunted and dug out a business card. Kearny had never heard of the agency. There were a lot of them he'd never heard of, mostly one-man shops with impressive-sounding names like this one.

"Well, that's interesting, Mr. Wright," he said. He stood up. "But it *is* Christmas Eve and—"

"Or maybe Carroll had other things on his mind," Wright cut in almost dreamily. "His wife, Irma, for instance. Big fancy house out in

Presidio Terrace — even had a fireplace in the bedroom where she killed herself. Ashes in the grate, maybe like she'd burned some papers, pictures, something like that."

Kearny sat down. "A fire like the one where Ruth died?"

The stocky detective gave a short appreciative laugh. "The girls got a pretty hefty allowance — so why were they three months' delinquent on their car payment? And why, the day before they disappeared — last Thursday, a week ago today — did they try to hit the old man up for some very substantial extra loot? Since they didn't get it—"

"You checked the pawnshops." It was the obvious move.

"Yeah. Little joint down on Third and Mission, the guy says that Myra, the older sister, came in and hocked a bunch of jewelry on Friday morning. Same day she and her sister disappeared. She had a cute little blonde with her at the pawnshop."

Kearny stubbed out his cigarette and lit another. The smoke filled the cramped office. Cute little blonde didn't fit the dead Ruth at all.

"Irma Carroll," he said. "You think her husband delayed assigning the Lincoln for repossession because she asked him to. Why?"

"So old man Bannock wouldn't know his daughters had financial woes," beamed the other detective. "We got a positive ident on Irma Carroll from the pawnbroker. Plus she was away from home Friday — the day the sisters disappeared."

"And on Monday she killed herself. When did Ruth die?"

"Friday night, Saturday morning, close as the coroner can tell."

"Mmmm." Kearny smoked silently for a moment. James (Jimmy) Wright — according to the name on his card — had a good breadth of shoulder, good thickness of chest and arm. Physically competent, despite his owl-like appearance. With a damned subtle mind besides. "I wonder how many *other* local women in the past year—"

Wright held up three fingers. "I started out with a list like a small-town phone book — every female suicide and disappearance in San Francisco since January first. Three of them knew the Bannock girls *and* the Carroll woman, and all three needed money *and* burned something before they killed themselves. No telling how many more just burned whatever it was they were buying and then sat tight."

Kearny squinted through his cigarette smoke. He had long since forgotten about spending Christmas Eve with Jeanie and the kids.

"I figure you've got more than just that. Another connection maybe between your three suicides and the Bannock girls and Irma Carroll—" He paused to taste his idea, and liked it. "Raymond Edwards?"

The stocky man beamed again.

"Edwards. Yeah. I'd like to get a look at that bird's tax returns.

Real-estate office on Montgomery Street — but no clients. Fancy apartment out in the Sunset and spends plenty of money — but doesn't seem to make any. What put you on to him?"

"Two of the hippies at that Sutter Street commune gave us a make on a cat in a Ferrari who was a steady customer for psilocybin — the 'sacred mushrooms' of the Mex Indians. On their description I ran Edwards through DMV in Sacramento and found he holds the pink on a Ferrari. A lot of car for a man with no visible income not to owe any money on. And — no other car."

"I don't see any significance in that," objected Wright.

"You don't sell real estate out of a Ferrari."

The other detective nodded. "Got you. And Edwards made it down to his office exactly twice this week — to pick up his mail. But every night he made it to a house up on Telegraph Hill — each time with a different well-to-do dame."

"But none of them the Bannock girls," said Kearny.

The phone interrupted. That would be Jeanie, he thought as he picked up. But after a moment he extended the receiver to Wright.

"Yeah… I see." He nodded and his eyes glistened. "Are you sure it was Myra? In this fog… that close, huh?" He listened some more. "Through the cellar window? Good. Yes. No. Kearny and I'll go in — what?" Another pause. "I don't give a damn about that, we need someone outside to tail her if she comes out before we do."

He hung up, turned to Kearny.

"Myra just went into the Telegraph Hill place through a cellar window. She's still in there. You heavy?"

"Not for years." You wore a gun, you sometimes used it. "And what makes you so sure I'll go along with you?"

The stocky detective grinned. "Find Myra, we find the Lincoln, right? *Before* the cops. You get your car, I get somebody who ain't shy to back my play. I'd have a hell of a time scraping up another of my own men on Christmas Eve."

Kearny unlocked the filing cabinet and from its middle drawer took out a Luger and a full clip. A German officer had fired it at him outside Aumetz in 1944, when the 106th Panzer SS had broken through to 90th Division HQ.

He dropped it into his right-hand topcoat pocket, stuck Wright's card in his left. He had another question but it could wait.

The fog was thick and wet outside, glistening on the streets and haloing the lights. They walked past Kearny's Ford station wagon, their shoes rapping hollow against the concrete. He felt twenty years old again. From a Van Ness bus they transferred to the California cable, transferred again on Nob Hill where the thick fog made pale blobs of the bright Christmas decorations on the Mark and the

Fairmont. A band of caroling youngsters drifted past them, voices fog-muted. Alcatraz bellowed desolately from the black bay like an injured sea beast.

They were the only ones left on the car at the turn-around in the 500 block of Greenwich. Fog shrouded the crowded houses slanting steeply down the hill. Christmas trees brightened many windows, their candles flickering warmly through the steamy glass. The detectives paused in the light from the tavern on Grant and Greenwich.

"Which way?" asked Kearny.

"Up the hill. Then we work around to the Filbert Street steps. My man'll meet us somewhere below Montgomery."

They toiled up the steep brushy side of Telegraph beyond the Greenwich dead end, their shoes slipping in the heavy yellowish loam. Kearny went to one knee and cursed. When they paused at the head of the wooden Filbert Street steps, both men were panting and sweat sheened their faces. The sea-wet wind off the bay swirled fog around them, danced the widely-scattered street lights below.

Just as they started down, the fog eddied to reveal, beyond the shadow of clearly etched foliage, the misty panorama of the bay. Off to the left was grimly lit Alcatraz, and ahead, to the right of dark Yerba Buena Island, the 11:00 o'clock ferry to Oakland, yellow pinpoints moving against the darkness. Then foliage closed in wetly on either side. The Luger was a heavy comfortable weight in Kearny's pocket. He could see only about two yards ahead in the bone-chilling fog. When they crossed Montgomery the air carried the musty tang of fermenting grapes. The old Italians must make plenty of wine up here. There was another, more acrid scent; somewhere an animal bleated.

"They ought to pen up their goats once in a while," chuckled Kearny's companion. "They stink."

More wooden steps in the fog. They paused where a narrow path led off into the grayness.

"Catfish Row," muttered the stocky detective in Kearny's ear. "My man ought to be around some—" He broke off as a short dark shape materialized at their elbow. "Dick?"

"Right."

"She's still inside?"

"Right."

The newcomer pulled out a handkerchief to wipe the fog from his sharp-featured irritable face. Kearny got a vagrant whiff of scent.

"We're going in," breathed the stocky detective. "If the Bannock girl comes out, stick with her."

"Right," said Dick.

They started along an uneven brick path slippery with moss, then began climbing another set of narrow wooden steps which paralleled

those on Filbert.

"Your man is talkative," said Kearny drily.

"Canadian," said the other. "A good detective."

"But you don't trust him in this." Kearny then asked the question he hadn't asked back in the office. "Why?"

Wright shrugged irritably. "I've got enough to do without having to watch him." He didn't elaborate.

They stopped and peered through the gloom at a three-storied narrow wooden house that looked egg-yolk yellow in the fog. Dripping bushes flanked it both uphill and down. There was a half basement; the uphill side had not been excavated from the rock. Myra Bannock must have entered by one of the blacked-out windows which flanked the gray basement door.

The two detectives climbed past it to the first-floor level. Here a small porch cantilevered out over the recessed basement. The front door and windows were decorated to echo the high-peaked roof of the house itself.

A big black man answered the bell. The hallway behind him was so dark that his face showed only highlights: brows, cheekbones, nose, lips, a gleam of eyeballs. He was wearing red. Red fez, red silk Nehru jacket over red striped shirt, red harem pants with baggy legs, red shoes with upturned toes.

"*As-salaam aleikum*," he said.

"Mr. Maxwell, please," said Wright briskly.

The door began to close. The dumpy detective stuck his foot in it and immediately a gong boomed in the back of the house. Kearny's companion sank a fist into the middle of the red shirt as Kearny's shoulder slammed into the door.

The guard was on his hands and knees in the dim hallway, gasping. His eyes rolled up at Kearny's as the detectives stormed by him.

A door slammed up above. They climbed broad circular stairs in the gloom, guns out. Their shoulders in unison splintered a locked door at the head of the stairs. The room was blue-lit, seemingly empty except for incense, thick carpets, and strewn clothing of both sexes. Then they saw three women and a man crowded into a corner, a grotesque frightened jumble, all of them nude.

"Topless *and* bottomless," grunted Kearny.

"But no Myra," said Wright in a disgust that was practical, not moral. "Let's dust."

As they came out of the room, feet pounded down the stairs. They'd been faked out — drawn into the room by the slamming door so that someone who was trapped upstairs by their entrance could get by them. Peering down, Kearny saw Raymond Edwards' head just

sliding from view around the stairs' old-fashioned newel post. Edwards. The real-estate promoter who didn't promote real estate.

Kearny went over the banister, landed with a jar that clipped his jaw against his knee, stumbled to his feet, and charged down the hall. He went through an open doorway to meet a black fist traveling very rapidly in the other direction. The doorkeeper.

"Ungh!" Kearny went down, gagging, but managed to wave Wright through the door where Edwards and the black man had just disappeared.

There was a crash within, and furious curses. A gun went off. Once more. Kearny tottered through the doorway, an old man again, to see another door across the room just closing and the stocky detective and the guard locked in a curious dance. The black man had the detective's arms pinned at his side, and the detective was trying to shoot his captor in the foot.

Kearny's Luger, swung in a wide backhand arc, made a thwucking sound against the black's skull. The black shook his head, turned, grabbed Kearny, who dropped the Luger as he was bounced off the far wall. A hand came up under his jaw and shoved. He started to yell at the ceiling. His neck was going to break.

The black shuddered like a ship hitting a reef. Again. Again. Yet again. His hands went away. Wright was standing over the downed man, looking at his gun in a puzzled way.

"I hit him with it four times before he went down. Four times."

"Edwards?" Kearny managed to gasp.

"That way." He shook his head. "Four times."

The door was locked. They broke through after several tries and went downstairs to the empty cellar. But there was another door; the durable detective kicked off the lock. A red glow and a chemical smell emerged.

"Darkroom," said Kearny.

A girl came out stiffly, her eyes wide with shock. It was Myra Bannock. A solid meaty girl in a fawn pants suit with a white ruffled Restoration blouse. Square-toed high heels made her two inches taller than either of them.

"Did you kill him, sister?"

"Y — yes."

Over her shoulder Kearny could see Edwards on the floor with one hand still stretched up into an open squat iron safe. He was dressed in 19th Century splendor: black velvet even to his shirt and shoes. Once in the temple, a contact wound with powder bums. Kearny looked at his watch automatically. They'd been in the house exactly six minutes. *Six minutes?* It seemed like a weekend.

"Why'd you come here tonight?" demanded the other detective.

"Pic-pictures. I wanted—" Her jaw started to tremble.

"What kind of scam was Edwards running?" Kearny wondered.

"Cult stuff, I'm sure," said Wright. "Turning on wealthy young matrons to the Age of Aquarius or something. Getting them up here, doping them up, taking pictures of them doing things they'd pay to keep their parents or husbands from seeing." He turned sharply to the girl. "What kind of pictures?"

"Ter-terrible. Nasty things. We — he would give us 'sacred' wine to drink. It — distorted — able to see beyond… beyond the shadow. At the time everything seemed *right."* A long shudder ran through her flesh like the slow roll of an ocean wave.

"You and Ruth both?"

"Yes. Both. Together, even. With my own sister, with Irma—" She drew a ragged breath. "I sneaked in to get the negatives. I found the safe — but it was locked. Then Raymond ran in. I was behind the door." She suddenly giggled, a little girl sound. "He opened the safe, and I saw the pictures inside, so I walked up and — and I shot him. Just shot him."

Without warning she started to cry, great racking sobs that twisted her face and aged her. The stocky detective was on his knees at the safe, dragging out a thick sheaf of Kodacolor negatives and a heavy stack of prints.

"Where'd you get the gun?" he asked over his shoulder.

"On Third Street," she got out through her sobs. "We pawned our jewelry to pay for the pictures."

"Same gun your sister was killed with?" asked Kearny.

"Does this have to go on and on?" she demanded suddenly, with an abrupt synthetic calmness. "I killed him. Just take me in and—"

"We're private," snapped Wright. "Hired by your father to find you girls. Tell us what happened up on Mount Diablo."

His tone got through and started words again.

"I — we opened the pictures we bought — Friday morning after we pawned the jewelry to pay for them. Just prints. No negatives. We knew then that he planned to ask for more money. Irma was trying to raise it, but Ruth and I decided to just — well, kill ourselves. So we drove up to the mountains to—" Her face was starting to crumple, but the detective held her with his eyes. "To do it. But then I said I wouldn't give him the satisfaction. I would burn the pictures and then come back with the gun. But when I started burning them — when I —"

"Keep going," said Kearny.

"Ruth just grabbed the gun from the glove compartment and ran across the little clearing. I ran after her but she stopped and — and—" She started to cry.

“There’s no time for that now!” snarled the stocky detective to her tears. “Let’s have it.”

“She put the gun against her head and it made such a little noise.” Her eyes were puzzled now. “Like a twig breaking. Then she fell down.”

“Where have you been since then?” asked Kearny.

“I paid for a Lombard Street motel with a credit card and just stayed there. I wanted to shoot myself but I couldn’t. Tonight the radio said they had found Ruth. I knew then that I had to come here and get the negatives, so she wouldn’t have died for nothing.”

“Just dumb luck she made it here without being spotted by the cops,” said Kearny. He swung back to her. “Where did you leave the Lincoln?”

“On Montgomery. In front of Julius’s Castle.”

“Give me the keys.” She did. He said to Wright, “The pawnbroker isn’t about to identify the gun, since he sold it to her illegally in the first place. So if the cops find it here beside the body with only Edwards’ fingerprints on it—”

The squat detective’s eyes narrowed. He paused in his picture shuffling. “Yeah. It’ll work. And they’ll think Edwards burned whatever was in the safe before he did himself in. Yeah. Hand her over to Dick, tell him to take her back to her old man so his doctor can knock her out before they call in the police. I’ll—”

“You’ll bum the pictures,” said Kearny. “While I watch.”

Wright laughed, then handed a slim sheaf of them to Kearny. As Myra had said, they were indescribably nasty — acts performed by people strung out on the mind-altering psilocybin. The things people got themselves into while looking for kicks. It was lucky Edwards was dead or Kearny might have been tempted to do the job himself. He handed the pictures back.

“Burn them,” he said harshly. “All of them.”

The squat durable detective did. A good man, good when the trouble started. Myra drifted away into the fog with Dick’s hand on her arm. The Lincoln was parked by the closed restaurant, as she had said, and the key started it. No cops spotted Kearny getting it back to the DKA garage…

Kearny came to with a start, found himself slumped in his chair, his head hanging over the back at an odd angle, the edge of the typing stand digging into him. He groaned. His stomach hurt, his neck was stiff. Must have fallen asleep after getting the Lincoln—

Mists of sleep and dream cleared. He dug strong fingers into the back of his neck. Midnight and after, and he and Jeanie still faced a night of trimming the tree. The kids were at an age when Santa

arrived while they slept, so Christmas morning dawned to awe and delight.

He stood up. Damned neck. Sleep and dream. Dream.

Dream.

Dammit! He'd fallen asleep over the Bannock file, with Stewart Carroll's wife's suicide on his mind, and Ruth Bannock's death, and had dreamed the whole crazy thing! Fog. Cable cars. The house on Telegraph Hill.

He rubbed his neck again. So damned vivid; but there was no Greenwich Street cable car. Had there ever been? Catfish Row was now Napier Lane. And the Christmas trees now had, not candles, but strings of electric lights. Goats and the smell of wine were both long gone, fifty years or more, from Telegraph Hill.

He flipped through the big maroon *Polk Cross-Street Directory* to 491 Greenwich. *Mike's Grocery*. In the dream, a tavern. And in the dream, an Oakland ferry: they had stopped running a dozen years before. No Bay Bridge either — it had been built in the 'thirties. As had Treasure Island, also missing from the dream, man-made in 1938, '39, as a home for the San Francisco World's Fair.

All so damned vivid. Usually a dream faded in a few minutes, but this one had remained, sharp and clear.

Kearny started to sit down, frowning, then stood up abruptly and felt his topcoat hanging on the rack. Damp. It should have dried off from the rain he'd ducked through this afternoon. Well, it hadn't, that's all. A better way to check: merely pull open the middle drawer of the filing cabinet to look at the Luger—

The Luger was gone.

Kearny stood quite still with the hairs tinging on the back of his sore neck. Then he slammed the drawer impatiently shut. Hell, it could have been missing for weeks.

But what if the Luger was found in a yellow house on Telegraph Hill, a house with a dead body in the basement and a safe full of ashes? So? The gun had never been registered, and it was tougher to get fingerprints off them than people realized.

Dammit, he thought, stop it. It had been a dream, just a dream. And despite the dream he still had to find the Bannock Lincoln before the deadline. He strode around the desk, slid back the glass door, stuck his head out to look down the garage.

Kearny's face felt suddenly stiff. Bright gleam of chrome and black enamel. Correct license plate. He went out, stiff-legged like a dog getting ready to fight, rapped his knuckles on the sleek streamlined hood. Real. The Bannock Lincoln. How in hell—

Larry Ballard, of course. Larry had been working the case, had spotted the car, repo'd it, dropped it off in the garage without even

knowing that Kearny was asleep in his sound-proofed cubbyhole.

But what if Ballard *hadn't* repo'd the car?

Well, then, dammit, Kearny would dummy up some sort of report for the client. They had the car, that was the important thing. And — well, there would be some rational explanation if Larry *hadn't* been the one who'd brought it in.

Kearny left the office, setting the alarms and double-locking the basement door to activate them. He walked slowly down to the Ford station wagon. What did it all add up to? A crazy dream that *couldn't* be true, because it was mixed up with San Francisco of fifty years ago. Certain things seemed to have slopped over from the dream into subsequent reality, but there was a rational explanation for all of them — there must be. He would take that rational explanation, every time. Dan Kearny was not a fanciful man.

He reached for his keys in the topcoat pocket and touched a small oblong of thin cardboard. He looked at it for a long moment, then with an almost compulsive gesture he flipped it into the gutter between his car and the curb. It had probably been in his pocket for a week — people were always handing him business cards. Especially guys in his own racket, guys with little one-man outfits sporting those impressive-sounding names.

Kearny snorted as he got into the station wagon. What was the name on his business card? Oh, yeah.

Continental Detective Agency.

Author's note

I think I have invented a new kind of procedural detective story — what might be termed a "procedural fantasy." While it uses the dream "story-within-a-story" which antedates even William Langland's *The Vision of Pierce Plowman* (1550), it is also a Files Series procedural.

There are numerous clues in the story that suggest it is a dream, beginning with Kearny and Jimmy Wright walking past Kearny's car as if it doesn't exist in the time continuum the two men now inhabit. Some clues — for example, candles on Christmas trees — should be apparent to all readers; others — such as the nonexistent Bay Bridge — would obviously have more significance to those who are familiar with San Francisco.

Because the story grew out of my personal conviction that San-Francisco-in-the-fog still belongs to Dashiell Hammett, I have inserted quite a few clues pointing to the identity of Jimmy Wright.

First, the plot was frankly adapted from Hammett's masterly Continental Op story, *The Scorched Face*; even DKA's client (Golden

Gate Trust) was borrowed from it, as were the first names of other characters.

Next, the detective on stakeout was obviously that old Continental hand, Dick Foley. Besides retaining his first name, I described him essentially as Hammett did in *Red Harvest.* (It was in *Red Harvest,* you'll remember, that Foley suspected the Continental Op of murder and was sent away with the remark, "I've got enough to do without having to watch you.")

As for Jimmy Wright himself, his physical description, reiterated throughout *Beyond the Shadow*, is that of the Continental Op. His slang is the Op's slang, not that of Kearny's age: "private tin" for private investigator; "bird" for a man (instead of a girl); and "let's dust" instead of today's hipper "let's split."

To those who may claim I have cheated in giving him any name at all (we know the Continental Op was nameless in Hammett's tales), I would like to point out that the name itself is the clinching proof of his identity. As evidence I submit the editorial remarks of Ellery Queen which preceded *Who Killed Bob Teal?* in the July 1947 issue of *Ellery Queen's Mystery Magazine* (also included in the Dashiell Hammett original paperback titled *Dead Yellow Women,* 1947):

> "One night Dashiell Hammett and your Editor were sitting in Lüchow's Restaurant on 14th Street. We had sampled various liquids… Ah, those amber fluids — they set the tongue to padding. Anyway, about this character known as the Continental Op: who was he, really? And Dash gave us the lowdown. The Continental „Op is based on a real-life person — James (Jimmy) Wright, Assistant Superintendent, in the good old days, of Pinkerton's Baltimore Agency, under whom Dashiell Hammett actually worked…"

Q.E.D.
Joe Gores

The Munich Courier
by Robert Edward Eckels{© 1971 by Robert Edward Eckels.}

A new approach to the spy story — counterespionage by means of "pure deduction"… Now see if you can spot the crucial clue…

The rain started in earnest just as I left the train station and to cap it off there wasn't an Army car waiting for me. I hadn't really expected one although Giddings had assured me that of course there would be one. But then Giddings worked out of a nice warm office in Berlin and it tended to give him an overly optimistic viewpoint.

"It's really the Army's job more than ours," he had said, his ever-present pencil clasped between his two hands as he swiveled back in his chair and gazed up at the ceiling. Giddings had opted for the C.I.A. when he was graduated from an Ivy League college, but he affected the same rising-young-executive mannerisms as his classmates who'd chosen Madison Avenue or Wall Street. "An Army courier traveling north from Munich was murdered on a train and some passports he was carrying were stolen," he went on. "But the Army's criminal investigation people haven't been able to come up with anything solid so far. Since we have at least a peripheral interest because some of those missing passports are going to turn up in the hands of agents trying to infiltrate the U.S., I volunteered your services."

He brought his eyes down to mine and smiled ingenuously. "After all, you did prove yourself a pretty good detective in that Murphy affair behind the Iron Curtain. And when I mentioned you to General Cole he was most enthusiastic about giving you a crack at it."

"Thanks a lot," I said drily. Despite General Cole's enthusiasm I had no illusions about the kind of reception I'd get from the men in the field. It's only in television, movies and books that investigative agencies welcome outsiders coming in to tell them their business. Nevertheless, Giddings was my boss, and where he said go I went.

Now, with fine rain soaking into my topcoat and no Army car to meet me, I found nothing to convince me I was wrong. Still, a job was a job. I shrugged, turned up the collar of my coat, and ducked out to compete with the rest of the passengers for a cab.

The lieutenant who came in answer to my call from, the guard post at the main gate to the U.S. Army post just outside town was properly apologetic. He was also very young and very sincere. So he just might have really believed that the whole thing had resulted from a mixup in dates. I didn't contradict him and he took me straight to the post adjutant.

Who was something else again. He was a short barrel-shaped man named Donovan — a captain and well aware of the fact that he was growing old in grade. His graying hair was cropped Prussian short, and his eyes were small and bitter. He glared at me sourly from behind his desk. "So you're the man from Berlin," he said. There was no welcome in his voice.

I nodded. Besides Donovan and myself there were two others in the room: a tall sleepy-eyed man in civilian clothes named Hurley who was a sergeant in the Army's Criminal Investigation Division and a uniformed corporal named Lassiter.

"Well," Donovan went on, "I don't know what you expect to accomplish." He shot an angry glance at Hurley. "The C.I.D. has been raking the thing over for the past three weeks. With no luck."

Lassiter smiled nervously, but Hurley's face didn't change.

Donovan waited another moment, then turned back to me. "Are you acquainted with the facts in the case?" he said.

"Only in general," I said. "They told me in Berlin that you'd fill me in on the details here."

Donovan nodded curtly. "I don't know if you're familiar with the passport situation or not," he said. "Military personnel don't travel on passports, of course. But their dependents do, and so do U.S. civilian employees of the Army.

"Now, German law requires that all aliens residing more or less permanently in Germany have their passports stamped each month at a police station. To spare our civilians this inconvenience the Status of Forces agreement exempts anyone with a properly validated passport that identifies him as an Army dependent or employee. Unfortunately, the validation is good for only eighteen months. Don't ask me why, because the normal overseas tour for a career soldier or civilian employee is three years."

"So," I said, "the passports have to be revalidated at least once during each tour of duty."

"Right," Donovan said. "And the only place it can be done is at Army Headquarters at Heidelberg." He smiled wryly. "Originally each post would send its own courier to Heidelberg whenever it had a batch of passports needing revalidation. But then we got organization.

"A system was set up whereby the courier from Munich would take the train up once a month. And at each stop he would meet a

local courier who'd turn over his passports to be taken on to Heidelberg for revalidation. On the return trip the process would be reversed."

Donovan paused and made a slight negative gesture with his hand. "Like so many things that don't work out, it seemed a good idea in theory. It saved the expense involved in each post sending a man all the way to Heidelberg, and Headquarters didn't get its work piecemeal."

"On the other hand," I said, "the Munich courier would be carrying a pretty large number of passports by the time he got to Heidelberg."

Hurley decided it was time to put his two cents' worth in. "I'll say," he said. "The courier who was killed was only halfway through his run and he already had one hundred and fifty passports with him. Each of them is worth five hundred dollars on the black market — more probably when you're dealing with so many."

I whistled. "Which gave him a load worth at least seventy-five thousand dollars!"

"Right," Donovan said impatiently. He held up a hand palm forward as if to forestall me. "But we recognized the temptations involved and set up strict controls.

"In the first place, every passport is accounted for at every step of the way, and there's no ducking responsibility. For example, the individual turning one in to me for revalidation gets a signed receipt from me, and the passport itself is locked in my safe until it's time for the run. Then at the time the passports are batched up for shipment to Heidelberg, a blanket receipt listing every name and passport number is prepared. The local courier signs one copy when he picks up the passports and takes another copy with him for the Munich courier to sign as his receipt."

"And you better believe we're careful," Lassiter put in. I turned to face him. He was a lanky individual with a pleasantly bony face, sandy hair, and a ready grin. "I ought to know," he said. "I'm the local courier and I walk on eggs every time I have a batch of passports in my hands."

"He's right," Donovan said. "Everyone who handles passports knows he doesn't stand a chance of going uncaught if he tries to steal one.

"The other possibility, of course, was that somebody would try to hijack the Munich courier. To guard against that we varied the day he'd make his run and the train on which he'd travel, keeping it a secret even from the local couriers until just before they had to make their own runs down to the station. The Munich courier would be in civilian clothes to keep himself inconspicuous. On top of that he was

armed with a .45 and he traveled in a private compartment which he kept locked and was under orders to open to nobody."

"How would he get the passports from the local courier then?" I said.

"At each stop," Donovan said, "he'd leave the compartment, locking it behind him, and meet the local courier on the platform outside. Together they'd check the local man's passports against the list-receipt. If everything checked out, the Munich courier would sign the receipt and thereafter assume responsibility for the passports. If anything did not check out, he'd refuse to sign and the local man would have to explain it to his Commanding Officer. Of course," Donovan added gruffly, "everything always checked out, so there was never any question of that."

"I see," I said. "This would be the time when he was most vulnerable, though — when he was going back and forth between the compartment and the platform."

Donovan gave me another sour look. "Yes," he said, "but it was also the time when he was most on guard. And with the number of people always around on the platform the possibility of pulling off a hijack undetected was nil." He shrugged and gave his head a slight toss. "It was a good system," he said, "and it worked."

"Until three weeks ago," I said.

Donovan looked at me for a long moment, then nodded grimly. He turned to Lassiter. "You want to tell him about it, Corporal?" he said. "It was your run."

"Why not?" Lassiter said cheerfully. "It'll only be for the thousandth time." He grinned. "There's not much to tell, though, really. Three weeks ago I made my regular passport run down to the *Bahnhof*. As usual I was ten or fifteen minutes early. So I waited around on the platform for the train to come in. Only this time when it did, the Munich courier didn't get off."

"What did you do?" I said.

Lassiter shrugged. "Nothing," he said. "The train stops a little longer than usual here because this is where the crew changes. So I thought maybe he was just waiting until most of the crowd got down before he got off."

"You didn't get on the train and go looking for him?" I said.

Lassiter shook his head. "No, sir," he said emphatically. "I didn't know which car his compartment was in and I was afraid I might miss him if he did get off."

"But he never did?"

"No," Lassiter said. "The train pulled out leaving me there on the platform. It was the first time anything like that had ever happened and the only thing I could think of was that somehow there'd been a

mixup on the trains. There was another one due from Munich in another hour. So I waited around for it. When there wasn't a courier on that one either, I came back to the post and returned the passports to Captain Donovan."

The captain cleared his throat. "The first thing I did, of course, was to phone Munich. They said the courier had left as scheduled."

"That's where our people came into it," Hurley said. There was a decisiveness in his voice that belied his sleepy eyes. "A couple of MP's met the train at Heidelberg and went through it with the German authorities. They found the Munich courier all right — dead in his compartment. He'd been knifed in the throat and all the passports were gone. Apparently he'd been taken by surprise because his gun was still in its holster and it didn't look as if there'd been a fight."

"Was he the regular Munich courier?" I said.

Hurley nodded. "One of the regulars," he said. "A Master Sergeant named Bruton. He and three other NCO's rotated the duty." He smiled tightly, without humor. "And that's about all we know. We checked back on his run and he made every stop between Munich and here and none after. Which pinpoints it as happening somewhere between the last stop — Rundesheim — and here. We questioned the train crew but none of them saw anything out of the ordinary on that particular stretch of track — or for that matter anywhere, from Munich up to here."

"How about the other passengers?" I said.

"You tell me who they were," Hurley said heatedly. "Nobody makes lists of train passengers. By the time we found the body the train was almost empty and nobody's come forward to volunteer anything." He subsided into his chair. "We had the crime lab boys go over that compartment with the proverbial fine-tooth comb. They found nothing. Oh, plenty of fingerprints, of course. But they were all Bruton's or the crew that cleaned the compartment before the train left Munich. And the crew all had ironclad alibis."

I turned to Donovan. "What did you do with the passports Lassiter brought back?" I said.

He raised his eyebrows at me. "Left them right in his brief case and locked them back up in my safe until we can work out a new way of shipping them to Heidelberg," he said.

"May I see them?" I said.

Donovan hesitated, then shrugged and went to the safe. He opened it with his back to me and pulled out a thick plastic brief case. He came back to his desk, sat down, and pushed the brief case across to me. All without a word.

I smiled briefly, unzipped the case, and emptied it of all its contents — 25 green-and-gold U.S. passports. Worth, if Hurley was

correct, over $12,000 on the black market. I arranged them into neat piles, aware that everyone was watching me.

"How many stops did the train make between here and Heidelberg?" I said to Hurley.

"Three," he said. "Four if you count the suburban station at the north edge of town here. But only three where passport pickups were scheduled."

I nodded slowly. It all fit together now. I said, again to Hurley, "Did anybody check with the crew taking the train north from here to see if they noticed anything out of the ordinary?"

"No," Hurley said coldly. "There was no point to it, because whatever happened had to happen before the train reached here."

"Not necessarily," I said. "I'm not a policeman and I don't know police routine. But I do know clandestine operations, and I've been sitting here thinking just how I would pull this kind of operation off. And there's only one way it could have been done."

I smiled at Hurley whose eyes were no longer sleepy. "The obvious first move would be to corrupt one of the local couriers."

"Impossible," Donovan said. "Nobody's going to put himself in a position where he's sure to be caught and punished."

"He will if the price is right," I said drily. "But when you come right down to it, the only one who couldn't duck responsibility was the Munich courier. All one of the local men would have to do is turn his passports over to Bruton in the usual way, get his signed receipt, then follow him on to the train to find out where his compartment was located. It would be simple enough for the local courier to get the man from Munich to open up. After all, he would know the local man and if the local man called out something like 'I've got a passport you signed for—' "

I paused and smiled grimly. "And unless I miss my guess that's just what happened. Only Bruton got a knife in the throat instead of a passport."

"My God!" Hurley said. "The Rundesheim courier."

I shook my head. "No," I said. "It was Lassiter here."

"No, you don't," Lassiter exploded. Blood had suffused his face, turning it ugly. "You're not going to hang me with a lot of blue-sky speculation. You get yourself some proof before you start throwing accusations around."

Donovan nodded in agreement, and Hurley turned his eyes on me.

"It had to be Lassiter," I said. "Only a fool would admit to being the last to see Bruton — which eliminates the Rundesheim courier. The smart man would turn his own passports back in and claim never to have met Bruton. Which is exactly what Lassiter did. The timing

works out, too. Instead of waiting for the next train, as he claimed to, he rode up to the suburban stop and got off there. That's where he must have called from."

"You're still guessing," Lassiter said.

"True," I said. "But if you want concrete proof — where's the Munich courier's receipt?"

Hurley frowned. "I don't follow that," he said. "He wouldn't have a receipt if he didn't meet Bruton."

"Precisely," I said. "But he would have brought back *the unsigned copy* and it should have been in the brief case with the passports. But it wasn't, because Bruton had signed it and Lassiter didn't dare let that be found." I turned and smiled at Lassiter. "And that missing receipt is what's going to hang you," I said.

Last Harvest
by Joan Richter{©1971 by Joan Richter.}

A new crime story by Joan Richter

A story about two young people of today: Sheila and Jack understood each other very well — perhaps too well; but, as often happens in a close relationship, only the tip of the iceberg was visible…

❖

He leaned back against the kitchen counter of the one-room apartment they shared off campus. His thumbs were hooked deep into the pockets of his levis. “I’ve got to go. There’s no Way out of it.”

She looked up from the book in her lap, open to the same page it had been when he’d walked into the apartment fifteen minutes ago. She closed the book and put it on the floor beside her and uncrossed her legs from their lotus position. Slowly she stretched out and rested back on her elbows. Her dark hair fell in a silky drape past her shoulders and settled in a shiny pool on the floor beneath her.

They were almost mirror images of each other — young, lean, levied. Their sweatshirts were different. His was gray. Hers was a light blue, the same sky hue of her eyes.

“Look, I don’t want to go,” he said.

She stared at him critically, the expression on her face a challenge. “Then don’t.”

He straightened and freed his thumbs, slamming the fist of one hand into the palm of the other. “You know it isn’t that easy!”

“Who said anything about it being easy? But I don’t think it’s as hard as you’re trying to make out. There are three of them. That should be enough. If they want to take the chance, let them. They don’t need you.”

“They need the car.”

“Lend it to them.”

“My car? Are you kidding?”

“All right then. Let them find someone else who has a car. Let them rent one — if the car is what makes you think you have to go.”

The chill was fading from her voice. She heard the fading and she

knew he'd heard it. She wasn't going to lecture him anymore, she wasn't going to ask him not to go. She had been on the verge of begging him and she'd never done anything like that before. In a way it had frightened them both.

He crossed the space between them and knelt beside her. He touched her hair and looked deeply into her eyes. His voice was soft. "I know what you're saying. I hear you. And I understand. But I can't pull out, not now. There isn't time for them to get anyone else. Tonight's the last of it. There'll be a frost tonight and rain tomorrow. That'll finish it until next year."

He looked away from her, out the window. "The sky's clouding up. I hope it holds out for a few more hours." Absent-mindedly his hand slid down the length of her hair and then began to trace the familiar curves of her body. With a sigh he sank down on the floor alongside her.

Next year, she was thinking to herself as she lay beside him; that's right, there's next year — one last year of college and another harvest. "You told them what I found out about old man Purdy?"

"I told them."

"What did they say? How are they going to handle that?" She sat up, leaning on one elbow, looking down at him. "What are they going to do about the farmer?"

"Look, Purdy isn't going to be any problem."

"What do you mean no problem? What have they decided to do about him?"

"Oh, come on, Sheila, stop giving me the third degree." He tried to roll away from her, but she straddled him, pinning him down with her hands on his shoulders.

"Tell me. I've got a right to know. If it hadn't been for me you wouldn't know anything about Purdy, you—" She paused, hearing her own new choice of word. All along she had been talking about *them*, as though Jack were not a part of it. But he was. A cold wire of fear caught in her throat. "What are you going to do to him?"

He sprang up, knocking her away from him. "Nothing, damn it! What's the matter with you? What kind of guy do you think I am?" He stood above her, staring down at her angrily, ignoring the fact that she was holding her elbow which had hit the hard floor with a sharp crack.

She grimaced against the pain and fought the tears that sprang into her eyes. She swallowed and got her voice under control. This was her last chance to convince him. "Didn't you understand what I told you! Purdy will be waiting for you. Every night for the last two weeks he's been sitting on that back porch of his, waiting. If you know there'll be a frost tonight, so does he. He'll know tonight's your last

chance. He'll be there with his spyglass just like that little kid said. He'll spot you and go right to the phone and call the police." She didn't go into what getting caught would mean. She'd been over it all before — prison for God knows how many years.

"He may try, but he won't get anywhere. We're going to cut the telephone wires — and just in case he decides to use his car we're letting the air out of his tires."

She stared at him, the words registering. She almost laughed. They weren't going to hurt the old man. She hadn't thought of anything so simple — only a prank, really. She was so relieved that even the pain in her arm was nothing, but then almost as quickly as her relief had come, it was leaving her. She had lost the argument.

There was nothing else she could say now that would keep him from going. She was left only with the hope that everything would go all right, that when dawn came tomorrow she would wake and he would be beside her and it would be all over and done with. And when the Christmas holidays came two months from now she could look back and smile at all her fears — the money Jack would make on the deal would enable them to leave the bleak winter prairie for a couple of weeks and drive south into Mexico, seeking the sun.

She let her imagination float with the fantasy, needing it to blot out the terrifying alternative. When they would recross the border back into the States, the border guards would check again and again, as they had last year; but they'd find nothing, because there would be nothing to find. They might question the stack of Mexican newspapers on the floor of the trunk compartment, but discovering that's all they were — newspapers — they would not even be interested in Jack's explanation that he was doing a paper on Mexican journalism for a college course. Who would suspect that the destiny of the Zaragoza and San Pedro papers would be to wrap prairie-grown marijuana — so it could pass for the higher-priced Mexican variety.

A cold wind tore at their jackets when they left the apartment a few hours later. The sun had almost set and the sky was streaked with dark clouds. They walked to the car together, paused, exchanged a silent glance, then Sheila turned and rounded the corner where she could get a bus to another part of town.

The envelope of census material was under her arm. She didn't know if she'd make any calls, but she might try. The temporary census job didn't pay badly and she could fit the interviews in when it was convenient. Like now, if she wanted. She would go out of her mind if she stayed in the apartment alone, waiting.

Usually the questions and answers went easily. But sometimes not. Like when she had gone out to the Purdy farm two weeks ago where Brewster Purdy and his sister Elizabeth lived. It had been

chance that she'd been given the group of five farms to do. If it hadn't been that she had Jack's car to use she'd have had to turn it down. It was a long drive, more than an hour in a direction out of town they rarely went.

You really couldn't call the Purdy place a farm any more. The last hog had been slaughtered years ago. Purdy still planted a garden — beans, potatoes, corn — but most of his land had been let go. Wheat and cornfields had been overrun by what the old farmers still called locoweed.

It was Elizabeth Purdy who answered the doorbell the day Sheila pulled up to the farmhouse in Jack's old beat-up car.

"No one's rung that bell in years," the gray-haired woman said with a hesitant smile. "It's a wonder it works. Most people use the knocker."

Sheila had smiled. "I'm from the city. There aren't many knockers there. I guess I'm used to ringing doorbells. Are you Miss Purdy?"

The woman nodded.

"My name is Sheila Evans. I'm helping out with the census." She showed her identification card.

"Who's that?" a voice bellowed from somewhere inside the house.

The small gray woman colored and leaned toward Sheila. "That's my brother. He's in a ornery mood today. Worse than usual. He's been like that ever since the Federal government took away his subsidy. It never made no sense to me for the government to pay him for not plantin'. It didn't seem right, but then Brewster said I never had a head for such things. It's hard, though, when you're used to havin' money come in and then suddenly it stops. It's worse on people like the Stocktons down the road with all those little kids to feed. — It's a young lady," Elizabeth Purdy called over her shoulder. "She's come about the census."

A small wiry man appeared in the doorway. He was an inch or so shorter than his sister. It was hard for Sheila to believe that such a small body could house such a loud voice. His hostile gray eyes studied her and she knew it had not been worth her trouble to change out of her shirt and jeans. His scrutiny declared that her beige wool suit and brown pumps didn't make her any more acceptable to him than if she were barefoot and bikini-clad.

"You say you've come about the census?"

"Yes, there are just a few questions I have to ask."

"Well, I've got one to ask you. When's the government goin' to give me back my subsidy?"

Sheila shook her head and tried a small smile. "I'm sorry, I don't know anything about that."

"You don't? Why not? You work for the government, don't you?"

"Well, not really. I'm just—"

He wouldn't let her finish. "If you don't work for the government then you have no business cornin' here askin' us questions. I've a mind to call the police."

Sheila suppressed a sigh and decided it would be best to ignore the old man. She turned to his sister. "Does anyone else live here besides you and your brother?"

She got her answer and left, with the old man yelling out the door, threatening that she wouldn't get far, that he would have the police after her.

The Stockton place was the next on her list and she drove the two miles slowly, thinking about the old pair she had just left, wondering if there had ever been any happy times in their lives, wondering if the harsh life of the prairie had squeezed all the joy out of them — or maybe there had never been any joy to begin with.

October can be a pretty time in some farming areas, particularly in the northeast, with pumpkins and squash stacked in spilling hills of greens and golds, and farm stands tapestried with the rich colors of apples and pears. But not in the prairie states, Sheila thought to herself as she looked at the flat land, stubbled and browning. Any farm stand would become weathered and deserted, a wind catch on a blustery plain.

She turned into a rutted driveway marked by a mailbox whose black letters were chipped and faded. The name Stockton was barely distinguishable.

A brown and white spotted dog leaped playfully at her heels when she got out of the car. As she leaned down to pat its head, she heard the wail of a siren and turned to see a black and white police car, its red domelight flashing, turn into the driveway and screech to a halt, showering dust. The occupants of the farmhouse spilled out into the yard — a half dozen children and a thin woman in a faded blue print dress. The gaunt wind-burned man beside her was dressed in a pair of ragged coveralls.

"What's the trouble, George?" he asked with a curious glance at Sheila.

"Don't know yet. Just answering a call from Purdy." The patrolman turned to Sheila. "You the little lady who's just been to the Purdy place?"

She nodded. "He said he'd have the police after me, but I didn't think he meant it. I'm a census taker, but I don't think Mr. Purdy believed that." She unclipped the identification card from the folder under her arm.

The policeman looked at it and frowned. "Have to satisfy a man like Purdy. He makes a lot of noise. Sometimes what he has to say is

worth listening to."

He left then and Mrs. Stockton took Sheila's arm. "I bet you could use a cup of coffee after that scare. Come on into the house. No need for George to have used his siren like that. You'd think he was chasing some criminal. Gave me a fright the way he pulled into the driveway, throwing dust all over the place. Smart aleck, that's what he is, uniform or no."

"He's just doing his job, Amy, same as anyone," Mr. Stockton said wearily. "Only he's gotta jazz it up a bit."

He held a chair out for Sheila and she sat down at a wooden table whose finish had been worn by repeated washings. There was a plate of cupcakes in the center, freshly iced. There were eight of them, one for each member of the family. Now they had a guest. Sheila looked around at the faces of the children, roundeyed, semicircled by shadows. They were thin and looked tired, just as their mother and father looked tired.

With a pang Sheila realized she was looking close into the face of poverty and there was nothing she could do about it, except drink the coffee that was being poured for her and hope they would believe her when she said she'd just had lunch and was too full to eat one of the cupcakes they invited her to have.

"Old man Purdy is getting on," Mrs. Stockton said. "He's starting to have some foolish notions. Seems worse since they took away the subsidies." She turned to the tallest of her sons who appeared to Sheila to be about twelve. "I want you kids to stay away from there. Don't pester that old man none."

"We don't pester him, Ma," the boy answered. "We just watch him from the old barn."

"Watch him? Watch him doing what?"

"He sits out on that back porch of his all day long watchin' the road along by the old railroad tracks. Sometimes a car stops and some big kids get out and cut down the loco weed that's growin' there. They fill up the car and take off. Ol' man Purdy has his spyglass on them and then he calls the police. The kids get picked up and Purdy gets a reward."

Stockton leaned forward and looked at his son. "Are you sure about this, Willie?"

"I'm sure. And there's something else. You know that cornfield behind his house, the one he didn't plant this year? It's full of locoweed growin' real thick. He's just waitin' for somebody to come and get that. He stays out on that porch even after dark, waitin'."

"How do you know *that,* Willie?" His father's voice was stern.

Willie's thin face whitened. "Sorry, Pa. We won't do it again, but Jim and I snuck up to the house the other night and saw him sittin'

there."

The boy next to Willie nodded his head. "He had his pipe goin' and ever' once in a while we could see it glow up. Say, Pa, how much money do you get for bein' an informer?"

Mr. Stockton raised his hand, then remembering their guest, he lowered it.

Sheila had her collar turned up against the wind and was glad when she saw the bus come round the comer. It was colder than she had thought. She should have worn a sweater. She found a seat by the window and stared out at the darkening evening trying to get her thoughts under control. The bus was warm, but she was still cold and she knew it was a different kind of chill that she felt — not from the outside, but from within.

The Purdy place was the last on her list. All the others, marked carefully on the map made from scoutings done early in the summer, had been hit and harvested. The stalks were hanging in garages and apartments and dormitories, upside down, so the sap could flow into the leaves, drying, waiting to be processed. There was none in the apartment she shared with Jack. He'd given in to her on that. Only the Mexican papers they'd bought last year were under the bed they shared, dusty and beginning to yellow. They would be used soon, if everything went as planned.

She got out at the bus stop she'd intended, but now that she was there she didn't feel like ringing doorbells. It was too late anyhow. People would be having supper. She went into a diner, found an empty booth, and ordered a hamburger and coffee. She could see the street from where she sat and the comer where the bus had stopped. She could have stayed on the bus, gone to the end of the line, and come back, but she hadn't thought of it. The coffee came and the hamburger. She ate it, thinking of the Stocktons and their thin faces and hungry stomachs. Her own churned with a new and wild fear.

It was two o'clock in the morning and the place in the bed beside her was empty. The apartment was lonely and still. She got up and went to the window. Against the street lamp she could see a light swirl of snow. Jack had been right about the frost. She looked down the street hoping to see the lights of his jalopy come round the corner. She stayed there a long time, watching, waiting.

When dawn came and she was still there and Jack hadn't come, she knew for certain that something had gone wrong. But she didn't know what and she didn't know how to go about finding out. She couldn't call the police to ask if they'd picked someone up named Jack Finley. What if they hadn't? Maybe Jack had managed to get away.

At ten o'clock she took the bus to school and got off at the south end of the campus. She wanted to walk. The sun was out and the air was crisp. The yellow roses that bloomed along the path leading to the library were brown and withered, their heavy heads drooping, hit by last night's frost.

A group of students she didn't know came down the library steps. One of them was carrying a transistor radio and she listened for a moment to a snatch of a song that Jack sometimes whistled while he shaved. The melody lingered in her head after she could no longer hear it.

And then suddenly it hit her and she began running back along the walk to where she had got off the bus, where she could get another that would take her back to the apartment. If she were lucky she'd be there by eleven, in time for the news.

She burst into the apartment and snapped on the radio. It was two minutes past eleven.

A voice came on, oddly familiar, a child's voice, frail, earnest. "I'm gonna get myself a bicycle. That's what I'm going to do with part of it. The rest I'm gonna give to my Pa."

Her breath caught as she listened and in her mind she saw the small, thin, white face of the little boy, remembering him as he had asked, "Say, Pa, how much money do you get for bein' an informer?"

Once a Cop
by John Pierce{© 1971 by John Pierce.}

A new Inspector Seal (retired) story by John Pierce

If you read a story in which a shoemaker is the murderer, you know of course that not every shoemaker is a murderer. Or if you read about a corrupt politician, you don't have to be reminded that most politicians are not corrupt. Or if you read about a fraudulent Old Master, you know that not every Old Master is bogus, that not every art dealer is dishonest…

❖

"I've been locked up for less than that," commented Fingers Hinschelman, who had also been locked up for more.

"They do seem incautiously loud," agreed Seal, Chief Inspector (retired).

Reference was to a set of sounds gusting from a front window of the Peter Pan Nursery and Pleading School. An unmatched set of sounds — raucous, overloud, unnerving. A recorded band thundered *Anchors Aweigh* in accompaniment to the brisk military commands of Miss Springer as amplified through a granular loudspeaker. It threatened the tree leaves as it laced its way halfway across the park to the stone bench that the two men occupied.

"…HERE WE GO NOW, *ROUND* THE WORLD, *ROUND* AND *MARCHING, THREE* AND *FOUR; FAST*ER, WILLIAM, THREE AND *FOUR; NO, NO,* SUSAN, YOU MISSED *FRANCE;* TURN *RIGHT,* REUBEN, *GREECE* IS NEXT AND *HUP* AND TWO AND THREE AND FOUR…"

"Should I ask what that is?" puzzled Hinschelman.

"Moppet geography," Seal conjectured. "I'd suspect they have a world map chalked out on the floor across which the class marches Napoleonically." ("… *THREE* AND FOUR…")

"And that's your lady friend drilling them?"

Seal failed to answer. Was it? Not since that candlelit evening a month ago had he seen or talked to Miss Springer, a bounteously endowed divorcee in her thirties. He did not have her address; she was not in the phone book. Twenty years on the force and he could not relocate a simple winsome woman — until yesterday when, quite inadvertently, he met her leaving this nursery school where, it turned

out, she taught.

He had walked with her to the branch post office where she mailed off a package of school business to something called the Ubiquity Mailing Service in San Francisco. She seemed flustered at seeing him, resistant to his overtures. Still he persisted until she accepted his dinner invitation for tonight. Now, hearing her amplified voice, reservations fought him like mosquitoes. This was Miss Springer, with the drill-sergeant voice? Had police work diluted his judgment?

The question was pigeonholed. A blue sedan parked between the school and the corner candy store and its driver, an elegant, graying gentleman in stylish garb, worked free. Armed with a brief case and a small box camera, he crossed the street to the school, nodded to the heavy-set handyman at the bright red door, and vanished inside.

"Why, that's Antoine Grivas," remarked Seal.

"Don't know him," said Hinschelman, "but I've seen that guy at the door."

"Big name in education, Grivas. World traveler, twelve languages, crack photographer, and heads up a large philanthropic outfit — Foster Children International."

"Know him, Inspector?"

Seal shook his head. "I've seen him wandering around the slums with his camera. Then, happened onto a showing of his photographs at a local art gallery a month ago. Same day and place I first met Miss Springer, though I scarcely thought them connected in any way."

"What kind of photographs?"

"Poverty. Torn posters on old board fences, rundown tenement buildings, close-ups of underprivileged children, the faces of the poor."

"And you paid to see *that*?"

"No, just happened by the gallery. No admission fee. It was the afternoon of my last day on the force and I was en route, with your old nemesis Captain Stout, for a glass or two of Auld Lang Syne. We took a look in. Regrettably, sirens in the street called Stout back to duty and, left alone, I met Miss Springer. My evening continued with her."

"Did you tell her you were a cop?"

"No, didn't mention it. Why?"

"The fact that you didn't is why. Dame like that, hanging around art galleries, might look down her nose at a cop."

"I hardly think she's that sort."

"But she did disappear."

"Like a lead bar at eighty fathoms."

"What's a hotshot photographer like him doing with a cheap

Brownie camera?"

"Could be primitivism's back in vogue."

"So now you find out she and Grivas are teaching in the same kiddie school. Jealous, Inspector?"

"Don't be ridiculous," dissembled Seal. Nosy fellow, Hinschelman. His mind is like his fingers on a safe knob or lifting a wallet. Annoyingly acute. Was it in fact jealousy, this pollution of his happy mood? Was Grivas the gray force behind her tantalizing secretiveness, her refusal to tell him where she lived?

He thanked heaven he was well back in the park — behind the green foliage, beyond the equestrian bronze of the dyspeptic General Grant. To be spotted by her and thought spying would be unthinkable. Spying he was, in point of fact, but she could hardly have known it was five-year-old William Wagner — one of her blue-chip marching pupils — he rode tail on. Nor, under any circumstances, could he tell her.

"… WHO'S ON *CHI*NA? COME *BACK,* WILLIAM; *N-O-W* YOU'VE GOT IT, THREE AND *FOUR*…"

"Little William's your quarry, right?" came from Hinschelman.

"William, alias Billy. Yes."

"Like to have a look at him."

"You will. They'll soon break for afternoon recess and adjourn to that candy store."

"What's his problem? What's his mother worried about?"

"The source of the lad's daily income. Each morning he is delivered to the Peter Pan School, pockets bare of funds. In the afternoon he returns home clinking small change, devoid of appetite, his mouth a rainbow of bilious colors from the candy shop. She — his mother — is the daughter of an old friend. She cornered me at a recent soiree and I was trapped into volunteering my services. I now tail a five-year-old when I should be out playing golf. And now to find that Miss Springer works here—"

Hinschelman shook his head, dissatisfied. "His mother couldn't just *ask* the kid where he gets it?"

"Oh, no. Modern psychology forbids it. To ask where he gets the money would be not only a sign of distrust but an encroachment on his privacy."

"Oh, my — oh, for — and you believe that?"

"Not exactly," chuckled Seal.

"Me, I'd have it out of him in fifteen seconds," spat Hinschelman in disgust. "She couldn't call up the school and ask them?"

"She prefers not to. It could be the initial manifestation of, say, kleptomania, in which case she wants nothing known of it for the boy's sake, and in which case she'd seek more discreet professional

help."

"And how do you plan to go about it?"

"I'm not sure yet. Miss Springer has now reared her shampooed head."

Hinschelman cracked his knuckles. "Well, Inspector, maybe it's your lucky day — me running into you here in the park."

"How is that?" queried Seal.

"You have a thing going for this Miss Springer, right? You're having her over for dinner tonight. You don't hardly want her to see you crawling around in that candy store. Six-feet-two and distinguished mustache and two-hundred-dollar sports jacket, you might not blend in."

"I've been pondering that."

"Sweat no more, Inspector. I'd kind of like to do something legal. Anyway, I wouldn't even be here, out of Bagwell State Pen, if it hadn't of been for you getting me a job and going to bat for me."

"Or been in it," appended Seal, who had twice abridged his friend's freedom.

"Oh, I'd of been there all right. I was in and out while you were still playing polo. But it was you got me going straight. I'll do the candy store."

Seal was touched. "Thoughtful of you, Aaron. If you could get a line on his purchases, note the denomination with which he makes payment—"

"No problem. I'd of wandered over anyway. That fat guy at the door, I've seen him somewhere and it's bugging me." He rose. "You say Billy's wearing a red suit and cap, blond hair?"

"Beanie cap, celluloid propeller. I believe they're coming out for recess right now."

Hinschelman left, and from the red door issued half a hundred shrieking children. On the school's narrow concrete forecourt the handyman coerced them into a hand-holding column of twos. Would Miss Springer present herself to escort them? She did not. From the column's head the man appraised them sourly, barked a muffled command; and off they trooped behind him, gaggling like geese — out the gate and down the sidewalk to the candy store. Were they *all* filching money at that tender age?

At City Hall the clock struck two. My *God*, thought Seal, and vaulted to his feet as though kicked upright. At two — at this minute — he had an appointment for an eye examination, a booking he'd sought for ten days. He turned and walked quickly uphill, striding rhythmically, he soon found, for a new class in geography had begun and *Anchors Aweigh* drummed him forward. He could not seem to disentangle his long legs from the march's beat or the brisk Prussian

commands of Miss Springer.

"…THREE AND *FOUR; NO, NO,* SUSAN, YOU MISSED *FRANCE;* TURN *RIGHT* DUM AND DAH AND DEE…" I am *marching,* Seal discovered, horrified.

He skipped militarily out of step; he quickened his own cadence. Bloody little William anyway; what *was* this, skulking about after someone two feet tall with a celluloid propeller atop his skull? When would they begin to respect his retirement? *He* did not barge around asking the free services of his casual friends.

On he hurried, grumbling discontent, miffed at the collision of his romantic interest and the mysterious peculations of a five-year-old…

"…And so, well, the marriage 'didn't work out,' as they say, and I took back my own name and went off for study in Europe and came home decided on teaching, and here I am," concluded Miss Springer,

Seal, his eyes bleary, nodded understanding. The venue was his brownstone on Crown Street, above the park. He was not yet comfortably used to its grandeur. A wealthy aunt had died, willing him the two-story house, eighteen potted plants, and the money that made possible his early retirement. Side by side, in twin easy chairs, they dwelt on the lights of the city. Behind them a marble staircase coiled upward. Around them was the good aroma of gourmet cooking from the skilled hands of a borrowed maid.

"The brass plate on your door reads Creighton T. Seal, C.I.E. What is that?"

"Chief Inspector Emeritus," he answered. "An honor they gave me when I retired."

She changed the subject. "You mentioned your late wife. Should I ask how—?"

Seal, the pupils of his eyes still dilated and useless from the drops (dammit, he must be allergic to them), struggled to pour a second Scotch into their glasses. "She died in India," he said. Scotch flowed down his hand and up a shirt sleeve. "She fell off an elephant."

Her gasp did not seem genuine. Nothing was right, he thought. She'd been two hours late getting here (it was nearly nine) and had offered no apology. He could not see anything. Observing her from close range made his head ache. Eyes squinting, he groped for her hand with a highball glass and said, "How did you settle on the Peter Pan School?"

"So revolutionarily progressive," she answered. "Dr. Grivas' own method. Where else will you find kindergarten-age children reading and writing after two months?"

"And what is the method?"

"But I've said twice I don't want to talk about it. I work hard all

day and when I leave the school I leave it."

"My apologies." Not that he felt apologetic. Disgruntlement was more his mood. She was not the Miss Springer of a month ago. On that occasion, over drinks and red wine at the Italian restaurant, she had warmth and sparkle and had amused him with a cascade of fey chatter. It contrasted ill with her lacquered rigidity of tonight, her reluctance to accept his invitation, her blitheness as she floated in two hours late. Grudgingly he deferred to Hinschelman: she was some kind of fire-breathing liberal and he was a cop.

True, he hadn't, on that first evening, told her; each had paid decorous heed to the other's privacy, as if questions would sanction counterquestions. It was while walking with him to his car that a patrolman tipped his cap and said, "Good evening, Inspector." Abruptly she'd recalled a forgotten engagement; she'd insisted on taking a cab.

Or had he now antagonized her, by probing and asking questions, hoping he might turn her in the direction of William Wagner? Once a cop— He pleaded guilty. Here was his choice: pursuit of such romantic endeavor as his Chief Inspectorship had for many years precluded, or the solution of a kiddie crime. Repeatedly he chose the latter. Always a cop… "I could never do that," he said.

"Do what?"

"Compartmentalize my life. Leave the office and let a curtain drop. My work went with me night and day."

"Yes, you've made that quite obvious," she said.

"Obvious?"

"Grilling me, asking me questions."

"My dear, you know perfectly well I'm retired."

"Oh, come off it, C.I.E. You contradict yourself. A month, five weeks ago, your work followed you 'night and day.' Has retirement, in this short time, erased all your keyhole instincts and tendencies?"

Part of him bristled. He had mooned about over this razor blade? "I saw the children leaving school as I met you yesterday. I thought them charming. I'm interested in many things. I showed interest in your work. If that's prying—"

"It is when you're this insistent. Dr. Grivas has spent his adult life perfecting a radically new educational method. It's now getting its first full test. He is not about to have his record ruined by a bunch of half-informed, ignorant-rich parents jerking their children out of Peter Pan in mid-term out of some stone-age seizure of horror at 'something new.' He does not want his method bandied about or misrepresented at this time. He'd fire me in five minutes, he'd *strangle* me, can't you understand?"

"Severe payment," murmured Seal, again squinting to try to

improve his blurred vision. The phone rang. He fumbled for it on the table beside his chair. He said, “Yes,” and then, “Oh, my God,” and then, “Yes, right away.” He replaced the phone and stared blankly at his feet.

“Bad news?” asked Miss Springer.

“Quite bad,” he said, standing. “A friend — gravely hurt in an — an accident.”

“Not dead?”

Seal, mind deadened, scarcely heard her. “What?”

“Nothing,” she said quickly. “Yes, you must go to him right away.”

“I can’t see to drive. I’ll get a taxi and drop you home.”

Miss Springer would not hear of it. Suddenly she’d remembered an engagement. She would take her own cab.

On the sidewalk he apologized profusely. Their goodbyes were polite.

The woman named Louise Potchernik led him through an ugly fourth-floor room to the doorway of the bedroom where Hinschelman lay. His face was pale, his eyes were closed. He was heavily bandaged around the left shoulder and upper trunk.

“He’s had a hypo,” she said. “He’ll be out for four or five hours. I ran straight for Dr. Mendez. He just lives down the block.”

Yes, Mendez. Unfrocked and delicensed on an illegal abortion count, but a competent doctor with a brisk underworld trade.

She said, “Nobody else I dared go to with Hinsch on parole. One reason Hinsch kept mumbling your name, I guess. Thought you might help if the cops came.”

“But they haven’t.”

She shook her head. “Listen, I got a mop and bucket of water and washed blood off the stairway and clear down to Blake Street between those old empty condemned warehouses where it happened.”

“What did happen?”

“Shot twice, shoulder and chest. Mendez said another two inches and—”

“No, I mean from the start.”

“First he came home. Eight-twenty or so. Started to phone you but remembered you had an engagement. Had some things to tell you. Said something about a candy store and then, talking more like to himself than to me, said, ‘every *one* of those kids had a brand-new quarter.’ Couldn’t seem to get over that, whatever it meant. Said to tell you that ‘in case something happens,’ the stuff came from the school-house.”

“He went into that school?” asked Seal incredulously.

"Some school somewhere. He talks to himself a lot more than to me. I think it's a habit from prison."

"And then?"

"I fixed supper, we ate, and he went downstairs and down Blake Street towards this deli' to get a six-pack and cigarettes. The next I knew was hearing him moaning from half a flight down. He doesn't weigh but a hundred and fifteen. I got him up here and ran for Mendez."

"Could he tell you anything?"

"Mendez?"

"Hinsch."

"Pretty delirious. Came to, passed out, and so on. Said your name, 'Seal,' and then 'dark' over and over again. That really scared me, that 'dark.' Said 'room,' and then 'dark' again. And said another thing — I had to bend down to make it out. Said 'Bullfrog.' "

"Bullfrog?"

"That's all," she said. "Here's these things for you." From beneath a soiled sofa cushion she withdrew certain sheets of paper, seemingly a mimeographed list. She handed him two mounted film slides. "Here's something else. The bullet Mendez dug out of him. Says it's from a .32 pistol."

The feel of it was .32, but Seal could not adjust his eyes to it or to the print on the mimeographed pages. He rose and walked back to the man's bedside and leaned to hear his labored breathing. "He was helping me," he said, "but I never wanted him going into that school."

"Yeah, but you know Hinsch. Show him a door with a fool-proof lock on it and give him enough reason — and always talking about owing you so much."

"Not that much," Seal said, and pocketed what she had given him. "I'll look into it. I'll straighten it out."

"We might have to move him. Someone around that school must have seen him. I can't have the police here."

"Call me. Don't say anything. Just say he was on his way for cigarettes and got shot."

He picked at a filet off the warmer and, eyes functionless, went to bed. Visions of Hinschelman followed him. He'd gone scrambling off at the critical moment, leaving Fingers to do his dirty work. How long might the man have waited for him, or how many times had he telephoned? And he was unreachable, of course — seeing the optometrist, shopping about for exotic viands for the strange Miss Springer. While he awaited her, cocktail apparatus ready, Hinschelman, in his misguided fervor, got into and out of the Peter Pan School, bringing booty of questionable importance. While Seal

and Miss Springer sipped drinks and crossed conversational hatpins, someone found Hinsch with two rounds of a .32.

And Miss Springer? Where did the shoots of her belligerence lead? Or her almost paranoiac defensiveness? Love of Grivas, fear of Grivas, loathing of Seal as an ex-cop?

And what about Grivas carrying an antique box camera around?

Working the night shift at headquarters was one Lieutenant Gibbet, a close-mouthed young officer whom Seal had trained. From his bedside telephone he called him, asking any information on anyone in the files known as "Bullfrog." Gibbet did not recognize the name, he'd ring him back.

"BEBO OGOLOGO SENDS HIS THANKS!!"

The caption, in urgent boldface, was under the touching photo of a potbellied, hollow-eyed African child. Following was the quarter-page advertisement on a page of *Family Way,* one of a half ton of female magazines left in a storeroom by Aunt Grace. There ensued (translated from the Swahili) this letter:

"Before you, dear Mrs. Bernice Borkey of Trestle Glen, Idaho, USA, I could not went to school. Here is picture. Wind blow hut away and flood take mealie plot and I every day find grubworms and lizard for sick sister eat and boil *posho* — our only sheep die heart water. Find berries and wart-hog curds. Wear leaves and no doctor for sister dying, *baya sana!* (Very bad). Then you have adopt us now new hut and littles barley meal for eat and scabs better since you send money."

A plea from Foster Children International followed. Would *you* turn *your* back on the tens of thousands of Bebo Ogologos dying of malnutrition and hopelessness in every land? Twenty-five dollars monthly (less than you now spent for cigarettes or a 'night on the town') offered you the rewarding knowledge that you kept a Bebo alive. Your orphan would write personal letters and send snapshots, as did Bebo… *WILL YOU HELP?"*

Seal tossed the magazine aside, tested his improved vision on the city skyline, and picked up the ringing phone. Respectfully a man asked if he would hold the line for Captain Stout of Detectives. "Certainly," Seal answered and, once on the "hold" button, hung up. A worn gag of Stout's, prefatory to a jocular harpoon. The phone rang again. He let it ring while he thought. He knew now who "Bullfrog" was but he couldn't tell them. Pull in Bullfrog and they'd nail Hinschelman with a housebreaking — five years in any courtroom with his past. On the twelfth or sixteenth ring he answered.

"Ah, Inspector," Stout said, buoyant as an airline ticket girl.

"Stout."

"Thought you might have a comment on your boy Hinschelman, who's just made the charts again."

"Bad connection. Can hardly hear you."

"Aaron. Fingers. Little excitement around here; we had **a** pool running on how long he'd keep out of trouble effective the date you soft-hearted him out of the pen."

"What kind of trouble?"

"We voted to ask you. You were seen coming in and then going out, by taxi number, last night."

"Wonder who saw that?"

"Didn't give name. Called us around midnight. Spoke of you and said Hinschelman got himself shot."

"So what's this, your quarter-hourly coffee break?"

"Boys took a second vote, decided you might know where he is. We got there, nobody home. Pretty sloppy job of swabbing blood off that stairway and clearing out the medic smells. Ex-Doctor Mendez came to mind. Fancy Mendez being missing, too."

"Unbelievable," Seal said. "So someone shot Fingers, you say. That's your charge, his getting shot? Or is it 'not being home at night?' "

"Charge is being good old Hinschelman with a record as long as New Year's morning. Boys wanted me to call you. They're having trouble picturing someone just walking up and shooting Hinschelman without provocation."

"Then you need some new boys. Everybody down there knows he dropped me information." Seal laughed. "Provocation? Without Hinsch you'd have a dozen unsolved jewelry heists on your hands."

"They asked me when he last dropped you information."

"Tell them I don't know. I had drops in my eyes yesterday and they clouded my memory. Tell the boys this: ever since Bagwell State he's been working as timekeeper on the midnight shift at Plynx Automotive. Call his super if you don't think he's straight."

"Straight as the pool cue of a hustler's mark. We'll know when we pick up the guy that shot him."

"Yes, don't forget him in your hilarity. While you're laughing he might be gunning down someone else. Funny thing about that nameless phone call when you come to think about it. I got word around nine and went out for the straight story, which is that Hinsch was on the way to a store for some cigarettes. Someone, your party, went to all the trouble of writing down my cab number. Odd hobby, wouldn't you think? Or maybe he just likes to collect cab numbers. Makes phone calls, too. Along about midnight he got around to

phoning you."

Stout answered less jovially. "More than you did."

"Yes, but three long hours later. Think it might be they held off until they learned the assassination had aborted and Hinsch was out of range? Pretend — you and the boys — that they knew of his parolee status and were settling for his reconsignment to the pen."

"We'd still want to know 'Why?' We'll find out. We're all tired of Hinschelman. Nobody favored releasing him but you."

"Me, the warden, and the parole board."

"Yeah, invite them all over, drink some warm beer. You'll keep us posted, naturally."

"I always do," smiled Seal.

He returned to the arcana that Fingers had lifted from the school. Straddling a heap of minor mysteries was the reasoning behind the theft of these things. On the film slides were microscopic rows of scriptography, indecipherable without a projector. Mimeographed were alphabetical rosters ('N' into 'O') tom at random from a loose-leaf notebook listing donors and foreign foster children of the charity fund. He read the five pages. Here, in the orphan column, might be something worth driving over to his Uncle Malcolm's about.

He was folding the pages when a penciled notation on the back of one caught his eye. It was in Hinschelman's handwriting. It said: "Ubiquity Mailing Service, San Francisco." Miss Springer had mailed a package to that address. He opened his address book and dialed a San Francisco friend.

"… ALL IN *STEP* NOW, THIS IS *RUSSIA,* ONE AND TWO AND LENINGRAD; CAREFUL, KEVIN, WATCH THE *NORTH* SEA, NO WET *FEET* AND *HUP* TWO THREE…"

"What in God's name?" asked Stout.

"Nursery school over there," the Inspector said. This park bench was well back, farther back than yesterday's, behind the oleander bushes near the bandstand.

"Well, they're busting a city ordinance, all that noise."

"They may be busting more than that."

"What does that mean? What are you up to anyway, getting me out here in the woods?"

"You wanted information on Hinschelman."

"You found him?" Stout asked.

"No, and wouldn't tell you — yet — if I had. Got something better. He was shot out of that warehouse door by a hood named James T. Keech, alias Bullfrog. You don't know him — he filtered down here after four years at Bagwell State, where he seems to have

been a contemporary of Hinschelman's. Nice book on Bullfrog. Armed robbery, assault with deadly weapon—"

"Friend of Hinschelman's—"

"Wrong. Hinsch didn't know him but had seen him somewhere and remembered the face. Ergo, Keech didn't know Fingers until yesterday, which recognition he celebrated by ambushing him with a .32." He handed the spent round to Stout.

"We call that withholding evidence."

"How withholding? I just gave it to you."

"You know, sometimes you just make me squirm," Stout said. "And you wouldn't possibly be able to describe this guy or help us out on where he is."

"Can do both with the greatest precision, once we get a thing or two straightened out."

"I knew there was a catch. Get on with it. I can't sit out here all day for some cheap grifter."

"I may offer you something bigger."

Stout mouthed his cigar. "Wonder what it is about that word 'offer,' when you say it, that comes on like a hyena eating glue? What's the deal?"

"Immunity for Hinschelman."

"Doesn't need it. You said he's straight."

"Anything he did I asked him to do."

"Go to hell, Seal. You're retired, you've got no authority to do anything or have anyone else do it for you."

"Subject is a five-year-old boy, Captain. You want it?" Stout massaged his round face. Cigar ashes dropped to his tie.

"The two things are interlinked," Seal went on. "What Hinsch did for me and the shooting. I tell you that Keech acted under orders, and I ask who of any stature would risk killing a small-time pickpocket unless something of considerable importance was involved."

"Keep talking."

"I sent Hinschelman into a building for some information. Someone apparently saw him there, but nothing was done about it on the site. Your desk says they never called you. An hour or so later Keech shot him. The place Hinschelman entered employs, for the most dubious reasons, Keech."

Stout spoke as the wind changed. "…MEXICO AND *YUCATAN* AND ONE AND *TWO* AND…"

"I said what's this touchy institution?" Stout bellowed.

"You're hearing it from that window right ahead of you. The Peter Pan Nursery and Reading School."

"Oh, for Pete's sake," groaned Stout and stood up. "I'm going home."

Seal pulled him back by an arm. “Sit down. You want a coast-to-coast AP story or don’t you? We’ve already got an unregenerate hood running loose in a houseful of kinder-gartners from the best homes in town, and that doesn’t pique your cement head? There’s a lot more going on in there than a nursery school.”

Seal rose to peer over the oleander bush. Keech was guarding the door, but Grivas’ car hadn’t arrived.

“And what is that?” Stout said wearily.

“Thing called Foster Children International.”

Stout stared at him. “Antoine Grivas? You’re out of your mind. Mess with him and you’ll have every Women’s Club in the country after your scalp.”

“Better now than a million dollars later.”

“I’ve got five more minutes. Go on.”

He began with Billy Wagner and progressed to Miss Springer and then to Hinschelman. He dwelt on the strange behavior of the woman. “I’m waiting for one particular portion of the geography drill she’s giving, then I’ll be sure.” He told of the phone call last night. “She said, ‘Not dead?’ and then ‘Yes, you must go to him.’ Unusual things to say, just as if she’d been sitting there expecting it. I’d said ‘a friend,’ not ‘her’ or ‘him.’ ”

Seal paused, signaling silence. Stout eyed his wrist watch. “Go ahead.”

“I’m listening,” Seal said, “we’re getting to it. Here it is.”

“… *HERE* WE GO NOW, *ROUND* THE WORLD, *ROUND* AND *MARCHING, THREE* AND *FOUR;* FASTER, WILLIAM, THREE AND *FOUR; NO, NO,* SUSAN, YOU MISSED *FRANCE;* TURN *RIGHT,* REUBEN, *GREECE* IS NEXT AND *HUP* AND TWO AND THREE AND FOUR…”

Like a cat by a fireplace, Seal stretched, smiling. “Susan missed France yesterday. Missed it twice, once while she was clear out of the room on the way to the candy store. I missed it because I was racing to the eye doctor.”

“Brain doctor’s where you should have gone. I don’t get a thing.”

“It’s a tape,” Seal said. “It’s not the innocent geography class that passersby are supposed to think it is. I now submit this bizarre document from those premises — a list of the donors to Foster Children International and opposite each the name and location of his-or-her respective adoptee. Notice these foreign villages: you’ve never heard of a single one of them!

“I paid a call on my rich Uncle Malcolm who spent twenty-five years junketing for *National Geographic* and has notes and maps that money can’t buy. They exist, all right, these villages, but they’ve all got one thing in common: they’re unreachable unless you have a

helicopter or a dogsled. If not in ten-thousand-foot mountains they're deep in some primeval swamp or buried among Amazon headhunters or in forests you couldn't get a bulldozer through. Their one and only contact with the outside world is the mail burro or outrigger or native runner, whose arrival sets off two weeks of bonfires and tribal dancing."

"And what do you plan to do, relocate them?"

"Wake up, Jonathan. Say you 'adopt' one of these infants and, as time passes, get sentimental enough to go voyaging off for an in-person interview in his mudhole. Impossible. Conveniently so. That gets us to another murky area. Every school day a parcel goes out of that nursery addressed to Ubiquity Mailing Service in San Francisco. I found out what Ubiquity is. Ubiquity will, for a healthy fee, see that mail is remailed to an addressee bearing the postmark of any town, village, igloo, or cliff dwelling on earth. They do a brisk trade for practical jokers, college kids, 'missing' husbands, and such as play games with the F.B.I."

Stout chewed his thumbnail. "I am catching a gamey odor."

"Smell these film slides. No use trying to read them without a projector. Uncle Malcolm has one and knows some languages. This is his translation from Pakistani." He handed a typewritten page to the Captain. Stout read it and rubbed his beefy neck.

"If you're wrong I'll be selling shoelaces."

Seal peered over the oleander bush. "You've been saying that for twenty years."

"Support me and my family on your aunt's will if you're wrong?"

"When was I ever wrong, Jonathan? Better that we work fast. There'll be a ton of evidence in that building and Grivas hasn't showed up yet. Phone them to bring you a warrant, and we'll need four or five men."

Two men neutralized Keech in a quick pincers movement, taking his .32 away, silencing him before he could shout an alarm. In the unoccupied business office Seal went for the carton sealed and destined for Ubiquity Mailing, broke it open, and extracted the top envelope. The paper was of the poorest quality; it was sealed but unstamped, and addressed to a matron in Alabama with return address: Carla Pupin of Plensknik, Yugoslavia. The writing on the envelope and enclosed letter was in a child's wandering scrawl. A fuzzy snapshot of a small girl was inside. On a bookcase Seal found a jar of mint-new quarters.

They left Officer Wode there and bypassed the empty geography room, leaving the tape recorder playing. Beneath an unlit red light ahead was the door to the "dark… room" referred to by a delirious

Hinschelman. Inside Seal turned a light on and sidled down the line of prints paper-clipped to a horizontal wire.

"Pictures of slum kids, every one of them," Stout said. "I've seen some of these kids in the Fifteenth Ward. Terrible prints, aren't they? And this guy's a professional photographer?"

"Done poorly on purpose," said Seal. "Uses a six-dollar camera, prints them amateurishly. What other kind of photography would there be in North Rucksack, Paraguay?"

Stout shook his head, still doubtful. "Suppose they *mail* him the undeveloped negatives from all those places?"

"You sure die hard," said Seal. "Come along."

He took Stout down the wide hall festooned with crayoned cutouts and toward a door at the end of a corridor. Behind them the recorder receded and a new voice was heard — that of the real Miss Springer.

The door was at the left rear of a large classroom. A foot-square tinted window gave them vantage.

"It beats anything," Stout murmured, looking in. "Anything I ever saw."

Her back was to them. All about her at their tiny desks toiled fifty children, heads bent, tongues writhing, feet tangling with chairlegs, and knuckles white on their pencils as they copied from the three projection screens ahead. Three projectors at the rear wall threw three images of handwritten letters in three foreign languages. The calligraphy was round and flowing, easily copiable. Two aisles separated the class into three sections, each assigned its respective screen as copy fodder.

Now Miss Springer bent over Billy Wagner and smiled approval, walked on, then bent to assist a small girl.

"Know Italian or Burmese?" Seal asked.

"Know Spanish," answered Stout. "It says, *'Estimada Senora.'* Then it's blank.

"They fill that in to order," Seal said.

"Says: 'My name is Mateo. Here is picture. I am live in little pueblo of Saenz in Chile with my brother. I go to school now with you send money. I have dog name Lobo. When you send so kind have coat for winter and…"

His voice faded. "They copy it in the foreign language without knowing the meaning of a single word."

Seal nodded. "Keeps them from babbling about it at home. Grivas runs ad, receives contributions, has the children copy letters and address envelopes, adds snapshots, and off they go to Ubiquity Mailing Service to be postmarked in towns halfway around the world."

"And pays each kid a quarter a day."

"Rewards them, let's say. Cuts down overhead. Figure two letters per afternoon by fifty children — that comes to five hundred letters a week. Times twenty-five dollars a month per contributor gives them a $50,000-a-month sucker list."

"Minimum," Stout said grimly.

The door suddenly flew open and closed behind a livid Miss Springer.

She said, "Look, you keyhole creep, can't you understand I'm not interested? What do you want now?"

Seal smiled at her. "You." They were walking her to the front door when Antoine Grivas entered. A white carnation graced the left lapel of his imported suit; his shoes were English saddle leather; he carried a bulging brief case and a Brownie camera.

"Two bits a day," mused Hinschelman, "and those shysters taking home five figures a month."

They had found him and returned him to his own billet via ambulance. "I still don't understand all that noise we heard."

"The recorder? Oh, they had their regular morning curriculum," Seal answered. "Or enough to satisfy enough parents. It was afternoons that were given over to the illegalities, and the recorder backed up Keech's reasons for keeping people out of there — classes in session. His function was to guard that door."

Hinschelman wagged his head in admiration. "You're something all right, making sense out of all that junk I brought you. Didn't know what I was taking. Was looking through the front office and heard footsteps and just grabbed the first things I could. How did I know Keech slept in the place? I beat him out the front door but he must have followed me home."

"And phoned Grivas for instructions while you ate supper. She lived with him, and hadn't yet left for my place, so she knew what had happened."

"How'd she connect us?"

"Saw us on that park bench together. So did Keech."

"I played dead. It wasn't hard. I lay there and he came out of that doorway and searched my pockets, not that he knew I'd taken anything. I looked up when he was walking off and recognized him under a street lamp." His eyes closed. "Some racket. Now Billy doesn't get his quarter anymore."

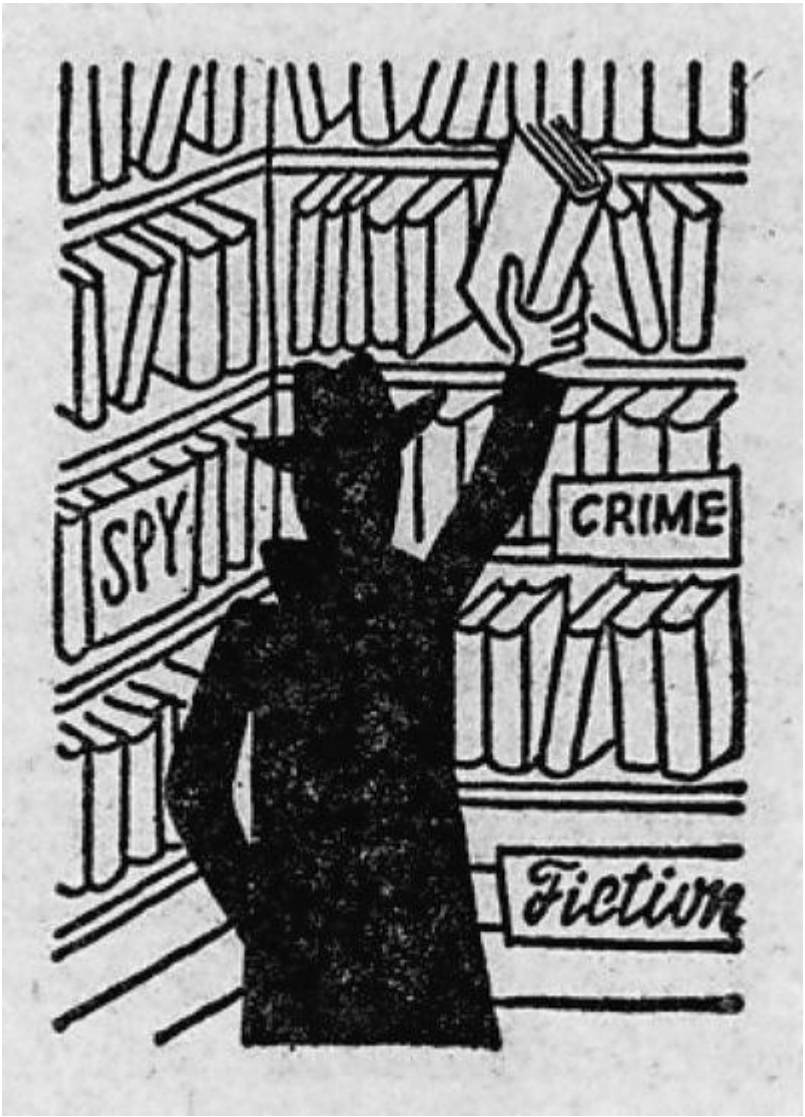
"Billy will now live within his allowance, which is a nickel a week."

"And you're without a girl friend."

"Never had one, as you wisely suggested."

"Maybe I can find you someone nice," said Louise.

“Please don’t,” urged Inspector Seal.



How Could He Do It?
by Avram Davidson{©1971 by Avram Davidson.}

A new story by Avram Davidson

'And soon they have the saw going back and forth again, push-pull, shove-tug"…

❖

Bob and Peggy Morrison both say they like things to be in order, but they mean different things by this. Take the shirts.

Peg comes into the bedroom and there is her husband taking the shirts out of the dresser drawer and rearranging them. First shirt, collar flush against the side of the drawer. Second shirt on top of first, but collar at the other end. Third shirt, collar same as first — and so on.

"Why are you doing that?" Peggy asks.

No answer. Fourth shirt, fifth shirt—

"Why are you *doing* that?" Peg, plump, and worried about her plumpness. Bob, neither fat nor lean nor concerned with fatness or leanness.

"This is the way I like them," he answers. "This way they — well, the other way the pile gets higher at the end where all the collars are and—" He is about to say, "and the top ones slide down and it looks disorderly." But Peggy interrupts him, speaking loudly and firmly over his words.

"Isn't that the silliest thing you ever heard of?" And soon they have the saw going back and forth again, push-pull, shove-tug.

Peggy is determined to root out the reason for Bob's obsession with the topography of the shirt pile. "You are acting like a compulsive," she says.

"Never mind," Bob says, closing the drawer. "Since you can't remember to do it, okay, then I'll do it myself." He moves to leave the bedroom.

"No, Bob," Peg says quietly. But with determination. "We've got to settle this. I want you to verbalize the situation."

Bob considers this, blinks a few times, then translates: "You mean

you want me to tell you why I like the shirts head to toe, sort of? I told you. When all the collars are at one end—"

But Peg shakes her head rapidly. "No," she says. "No. *No.* That's an oversimplification. Who *used* to arrange your shirts that way?"

He starts to smile, breaks off the smile, frowns. Then his face settles into lines of utter surprise; his mouth opens, he looks at her, then looks quickly away.

Triumph rises in Peggy's heart. "Oh, now we're *getting* somewhere!" she exclaims. "It was your mother, wasn't it? Wasn't it?"

Bob's smile returns. He laughs. His mother never piled any shirts in her life, he says. Bob and his father had to bring them to the Chinese laundry themselves. But the smile ebbs away and once again he gives Peggy that quick look; then as quickly he looks away again.

She pursues the question. Then who was it? Who?

In a low voice Bob says, "Cathy. I forgot all about it, but it's true, she used to—"

The triumph flees from Peg's heart, the heart gives a really terrible thump. "Who?" Her voice is low. "Cathy? Who's Cathy?"

Unhappily Bob says, "Well. I used to live with her. I was just a kid. She was even younger."

Silence. Then Peggy says, "Well, thanks for letting me know. I mean, thanks for letting me know *now.*"

This irritates him. "Well, for Pete's sake, I was twenty-six years old when we got married," he explodes. "You didn't expect me to be a virgin, did you?"

"Oh, I don't care about *that,"* says Peg. (But she does, she does!) "I mean — not telling me! Didn't I have a right — I don't understand how you—"

Bob makes an impatient gesture and once more starts to leave. Peg reaches out and takes his sleeve. "Where is she now? Cathy, I mean?"

Bob stands still, not looking at her. Then Peggy asks him a question about Cathy, an intimate question which she cannot restrain. How did Cathy compare to her? she asks. In lovemaking. Bob makes a throaty noise and Peg flinches. "All right, I'm sorry. But at least you can tell me where she is now. Is she here, in town? Do I know her? I mean, know her by sight?"

Rapidly Peggy considers if she knows any women, any young women, named Cathy. She cannot think of one and is relieved.

"I mean — am I likely to run into her when I go shopping? Does *she* know about *me?* And—"

Bob turns and this time looks right at her. "She's dead."

"Cathy?" Peggy wonders if he can hear the relief in her voice, the relief she is ashamed to feel. Then she decides she doesn't care. Hot,

frenzied images rise to her mind. Trying to dismiss them, she constructs a sudden notion that Cathy died tragically. An auto accident? Childbirth? Suppose the child is still living? Will Bob expect Peggy to adopt it? No, no, that would be too much.

Peg decides to drop the whole subject and never again refer to it, and she asks, "How did she die, Bob?"

And Bob says, very casually, "I killed her."

He leans against the wall.

"A rotten joke," says Peg.

"I was just a kid. We were boozing. She said something to me and I slapped her and she bit my hand and I lost my temper. I was lucky, I guess. I got only five years and I only served three."

Inside her head Peggy laughs hysterically. He killed a woman and he says, *I lost my temper — as* if he just — as if he only—

"I don't understand you," she says. She feels very cold. "How can you stand there so calmly and tell me you killed your mistress? How could you do such a thing?" Her voice gets louder. "I don't understand how you could *do* such a thing."

Bob merely shrugs. "I was only a kid, I tell you. She kept— Ah, but what's the difference? I paid my debt to society, didn't I?"

Even more than she is appalled by the knowledge that the man she has been living with, loving with, has had a mistress and has killed her and is an ex-convict, even more than that, Peggy is appalled by the brutal and archaic phrase.

"Paid your *debt?* Oh, my God! Bob — listen — the three years you were — away — did you get any *help?* Did you get any *therapy*?"

It takes Bob a few seconds to realize what she means. "No," he says, "I just worked in the print shop. But—"

"I just don't understand how—"

"Listen, Peg, let's forget it, huh? I'm sorry it's come up. We'll forget about it. Put it out of your mind and don't let it bother you. She wasn't worth it."

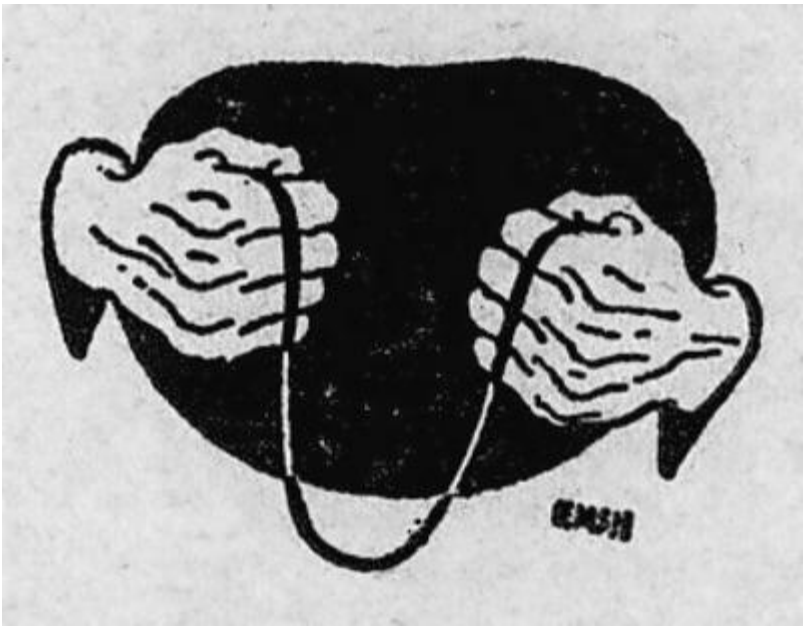
He smiles and scans her face for reassurance. Which she cannot give.

" 'Forget it?' I don't understand how you can say that. How can I *forget* it?" Her voice rises. "How could you do a thing like that? I don't understand! I don't understand! How could you—"

"Peggy!"

But Peggy cannot stop. She screams and screams at him. "How could you do it? How could you *do* it?"

Bob slaps her face and she, as if rehearsed, seizes his hand and sinks her teeth into it, and his face grows red and dark and then, and only then, as his fingers close around her throat and the room swims and vanishes, she understands how he could do it.


EMSH

The Theft of the Seven Ravens
by Edward D. Hoch{©1971 by Edward D. Hoch.}

The newest Nick Velvet story by Edward D. Hoch

Number 13 in the series about Nick Velvet, the fastidious felon who steals "only what other thieves avoid — the improbable, the valueless, the bizarre"…

Can Nick steal something and collect his fee, and simultaneously not *steal the same thing and collect a second fee? Can even the resourceful, ingenious Nick Velvet have his cake and eat it, too?…*

❖

Because of the early-morning fog, Nick Velvet's flight to London was an hour late in landing, so it was after ten when he reached his hotel in Mayfair. A message was waiting at the desk, giving the address of a little pub a few blocks away where the man he'd come to see would be waiting. Nick unpacked his bag and took the time to shower and shave. Then he was out into the bright May sunshine.

The Red Crosse Knight was a neat and busy pub that faced the vast greenery of Hyde Park. When Nick entered he saw at once the man he was to meet — a stout balding Englishman reading the green-covered Michelin guide that was his identification. His name was Harry Haskins and he rose to greet Nick with a friendly handshake.

"Good of you to come over like this, Velvet," he said, speaking briskly but keeping his voice low. "As soon as I heard about you I knew you were the perfect man for the job."

Nick glanced down at the guidebook, which covered the Perigord region of France. "Thinking of taking a trip?"

"My wife and I often drive through Europe in the summer. The villages of France are especially picturesque. Have you ever been there?"

"I was in Paris once, a few years back, but not really long enough to enjoy it."

Haskins glanced about, making certain their conversation would not be overheard in the noonday din. "We understand you're a professional thief, Mr. Velvet."

"Of sorts." Nick was indeed a professional thief, but he stole only what other thieves avoided — the improbable, the valueless, the bizarre. If someone was willing to pay his fee, no task was too far-fetched. And he knew Harry Haskins had not summoned him across the Atlantic without knowing this.

"It's a very confidential matter, really. On Wednesday morning — day after tomorrow — the Queen will receive a state visit from the President of the newly independent nation of Gola. As a good-will gesture the President of Gola plans to present the Queen with seven ravens in a cage."

"I see." The waiter arrived with two mugs of warm beer.

"The ravens have an important symbolism in Gola, and since we've always kept a few of the birds at the Tower of London it seemed an appropriate gift."

Nick Velvet nodded. He never questioned the motives of his clients, and the assignment seemed straightforward enough. "You want me to steal the seven ravens before they're presented to the Queen."

Haskins' eyes widened. "Not at all, Velvet. You completely misunderstand. We'll pay you to see that they *aren't* stolen."

Nick took a long swallow of warm beer and wondered about the next flight back to New York. "You're the one who seems to have misunderstood, Mr. Haskins. I'm no sort of detective or police guard. I charge a flat fee — about eight thousand pounds in your money — and for that amount I'll steal almost anything. But I don't catch thieves or prevent robberies."

"I thought this might be a special case, since it involves the British government."

"Then get a British citizen to guard the ravens. Why bring an American over for it — and a thief at that!"

Harry Haskins leaned back in his chair, a slightly pained expression on his face. "Your reputation is the finest, Velvet. And for internal security reasons we'd rather have a non-Britisher in the role. We don't want someone protecting the ravens who can be interviewed by the press the next day. Once your assignment is over you'll go back across the ocean and the whole thing will quickly die down."

Haskins' reasoning did not fully convince Nick, but Haskins' next action did. He slipped a piece of paper from his pocket and passed it across the table. It was a check for £10,000. "That's more than my usual fee," Nick commented.

"I know. But it's all yours if the seven ravens are delivered to the Queen on Wednesday morning. You'll note that the check is dated Wednesday. The funds will not be available until after the

presentation ceremony."

Nick Velvet thought about it. He was never one to refuse money, and to be paid for *not* stealing something was, in a sense, much easier than to be paid for stealing it. Perhaps, just this once— His hand closed over the check and he said, "I'll see what I can do."

Haskins nodded. "I'm sure I can count on you."

In the afternoon Nick took the Underground to Regent's Park and strolled along Broad Walk to the zoo. It was a clear day, warmer than usual for a London May, and he felt a bit carefree. With the check already in his pocket very little needed to be done. Perhaps a bit of shopping for Gloria, and some sightseeing, and by Wednesday night he'd be flying home.

He did feel, however, that a visit to the zoo might be in order since he was hardly able to distinguish between a raven and a crow. After some minutes of standing before a large domed cage full of big black birds he sought out a friendly keeper.

"Ravens and crows? Well, they're both members of the same family, but ravens are larger, and they differ in many ways. Ravens have a wedge-shaped tail, while a crow's tail is shorter and more gently rounded. They sound different, too, and ravens are more aggressive. Their nests are larger, and they lay more eggs. And of course there's a great deal of superstition attached to ravens."

Nick watched the birds circle in brief flight inside the cage. He didn't realize at first that the keeper had moved out of earshot to attend to his chores. He asked, without looking around, "What sort of superstition?"

A girl's voice answered him. "In Grimm's fairy tales the seven ravens were seven enchanted brothers."

He turned, startled, and faced a slim blonde girl with pale blue eyes, an upturned nose, and long slender legs. She was the best-looking thing he'd seen in London so far. "Were you speaking to me?"

"I just said—"

He grinned. "You know a great deal about ravens. And fairy tales."

"You're American, aren't you?"

"Guilty. But you're not British."

"Irish, actually. My name is Pat McGowan."

She paused, waiting, so he told her, "Mine's Nick Velvet. I'm over here for a few days on business."

"Do you like London?"

"The people one meets are certainly friendly enough."

She blushed. "I have a confession to make, Mr. Velvet."

"Let me guess. You followed me here."

Her eyes widened. “How did you—?”

Nick smiled at her astonishment. “You mentioned seven ravens, and I don’t believe in coincidences. Who are you, really?”

“Just who I said I am. But you’re right, I did follow you here.”

He stared into her pale blue eyes. “Why would you do a thing like that?”

“You steal things, don’t you?”

“Not from pretty Irish girls, I don’t.”

“I represent people with money, Mr. Velvet. They’re willing to pay. We tried to contact you in America, but we learned you were already en route here.”

Nick was beginning to see it clearly. “Don’t tell me that you want me to steal the seven ravens before they’re presented to the Queen on Wednesday morning.”

“You amaze me! Now how did you know that?”

“I do have a certain reputation in such matters, and since you’d already referred to the ravens and said you tried to contact me in America, it seemed a likely guess.” It also explained why Harry Haskins had been so eager to hire Nick to prevent the theft of the ravens. It wasn’t that he wanted a non-Britisher who could be out of reach of the press. Rather, it was simply that Haskins had discovered Pat McGowan’s plan to hire Nick and had got to him first with a larger bid.

“Then you are agreeable?” the girl asked him.

“My price is high.”

“We know your price, and Mr. Stavanger is prepared to meet it.” The dedicated intensity of her face reminded him of a girl he’d known in his youth. She’d worn spangled tights and twirled a flaming baton at political rallies in lower Manhattan, and afterward she had discussed the world’s problems with Nick over pitchers of cold beer.

“Who is Mr. Stavanger?” he asked. “What group do you represent?”

“The group is anti-British and that’s all I care about. I fought the British in the streets of Belfast last summer and I’ll fight them here in London this summer!”

“All right. When do I meet Stavanger?”

“You don’t. There’s no need to. Our money is good, believe me.” She dipped into her purse and came up with a handful of crumpled ten-pound notes. “Here’s a hundred quid, just to prove we mean business. Steal those ravens by Wednesday morning and deliver them to me, and I’ll give you the rest of the money.”

He hesitated only a moment. Then he took the crumpled bills and slipped them into his pocket. He looked up at the ravens in their cage, then back at the girl. “Miss McGowan, you’ve got yourself a deal.”

There was a certain difficulty about being hired and paid by both sides, and Nick only began to realize it that night as he strolled through Piccadilly with the theater-bound crowds. Either he stole the ravens or he did not steal them, and whichever happened, one side would refuse to pay him. He'd not been able to resist Haskins' offer, and likewise the money offered by the girl had tempted him. If only there was a way to collect payment from both sides…

In the morning he thought he had a plan, so he phoned Haskins at the number he'd been given. After the usual channeling through governmental secretaries he heard the Englishman's voice on the other end. Nick talked quickly, outlining part of what he had in mind.

But Haskins was immediately critical. "You want to substitute *crows* for the Gola ravens? I'm certain the Ambassador from Gola would never agree to that."

"Could I talk to him?"

Haskins hesitated, pondering the request, and finally agreed. All right. His name is Anson Gibellion. You can find him at their Embassy on South Audley Street. I'll ring him up and say you're coming."

Though it was only a few blocks from the impressive American Embassy building in Grosvenor Square, the Embassy of the tiny nation of Gola was drab and crowded — a narrow, bleak-fronted building that Nick almost passed unnoticed. A desk had been set up just inside the door, and a moonfaced little man behind it inspected Nick uncertainly before he announced his arrival on the intercom. After a wait of five minutes Nick was directed to the office of the Ambassador.

Anson Gibellion was a large man whose face reflected a European heritage. He greeted Nick with a nod and a handshake. "Haskins told me you'd come by, Mr. Velvet. He explained your position in this matter."

Nick nodded. "Then you know it's about the ravens. I've been employed to prevent their theft before the formal presentation, and my suggestion was that they be protected by substituting crows, and then bringing in the ravens later."

Anson Gibellion seemed truly shocked. "But the birds *must* be ravens! Otherwise the gift has no meaning! You see, the seven ravens represent the seven stages of our nation's history — our early independence, our colonial days under Spain, France, England, Belgium, and Portugal, and finally our present independence. The raven is a sacred bird in Gola, worshipped by our people and appearing on our national flag. A story is told of the first raven that came in the night to lay an egg in the home of our aged leader. He used the egg to restore the blackness to his silvery hair, and then went

forth like a raven to do battle with Gola's foes." He smiled apologetically. "Of course that was long ago. The ancient Greeks also believed that a raven's egg would restore the blackness of the hair."

Nick nodded. "The sleek blackness of a raven's feathers."

"The lustrous blackness," Gibellion corrected Nick. "The ebony bird, as your writer Edgar Allan Poe called him. Follow me please, Mr. Velvet." He led the way down a short hall to a little room at the end. There, occupying the entire surface of a table, was a large gilded cage made of fine wire. It housed seven great flapping birds, black as night, yet with a radiance that paradoxically seemed to contain all the colors of the rainbow.

"You tell me *these* birds can be replaced with mere crows, Mr. Velvet? Impossible!"

Nick stared at the ravens, taking in their rare beauty. They seemed even larger — and more alive — than those he'd seen at the London zoo. "All right," he agreed at last. "It was just an idea. But tell me why you and Haskins suspect an attempt to steal the birds."

"Frankly, the British government is more concerned than we are. That man Haskins has been haunting me ever since the ravens arrived in London. The theft of the ravens would accomplish very little."

"It would embarrass your government, wouldn't it?"

"Only temporarily." He smiled slightly. "It could cost me my position here, of course, but our President would have new birds brought in within a day's time."

As if to accentuate the remark, one of the ravens gave a high-pitched cry and flapped its wings. Nick eyed the bird reflectively, then excused himself and left.

By Tuesday afternoon he'd decided to try it the other way around. If Anson Gibellion would not allow him to substitute crows for ravens, perhaps he could still convince Pat McGowan and the mysterious Mr. Stavanger that such a substitution had taken place. He took a cab to Harrods department store and reached the pet shop on an upper floor just before closing time. He talked for a few moments with a pretty clerk in a green smock, and then left with a list of other London pet shops that kept evening hours.

After dinner he placed a call to Harry Haskins. The government man wasn't at his office, but the operator put Nick through to his home. When Haskins finally came on the phone Nick asked, "What do you know about a man named Stavanger?"

Haskins sighed into the phone. "To tell you the truth, Velvet, he's the reason I hired you. Stavanger is a revolutionary, and something of a mystery man. He may be trying to foment a revolt in Gola. In any event, we received a tip that his group would try to hire you to steal

the ravens. That's when I decided to get to you first."

"I see," Nick said. He'd suspected as much.

"Will you be at the Palace for the ceremony tomorrow morning?"

"I'll be there," Nick promised.

"Good, good! I'll meet you at the visitors' gate."

Nick hung up and took out the list of pet shops.

The morning was warm but misty, with a reminder of nighttime fog still lingering near the river. Nick reached the visitors' gate at Buckingham Palace a full hour before the ceremonies were scheduled to begin, but already the long black limousines were beginning to arrive with the dignitaries of the day.

Haskins was waiting for him, and they walked quickly past the uniformed guards and across the courtyard to the arched entranceway of the Palace itself.

"You're sure nothing will go wrong?" he asked Nick.

"The ravens are perfectly safe. You don't have a worry."

"These official ceremonies always make me nervous. Perhaps the job is giving me an ulcer."

They passed through an outer sitting room and presently found themselves in a large high-ceilinged waiting room full of Victorian furniture and elaborately hung tapestries. Looking at the room, Nick remarked, "The royal family has probably lived here for centuries."

"Not really," Haskins told him. "Only since 1837. Before that it was the home of the Duke of Buckingham. There are more than six hundred rooms in—"

He was interrupted by the arrival of Anson Gibellion, accompanied by two men carrying the covered raven cage. "Good morning, gentlemen," the Ambassador said, extending his hand to each of them in turn. "The President of Gola will arrive in fifteen minutes for the presentation. All is in order." He turned to smooth over the thin satin drape that hung over the cage.

"It seems as if you've earned your money, Velvet," Haskins was saying. He'd barely finished the words when there was a shattering of glass from the far side of the room. They turned, startled, toward the tall window that overlooked the Palace courtyard.

A large truck had backed into it, breaking the glass, and even as the guards came running, the high-ceilinged waiting room was suddenly filled with a confusion of darting blackness. The truck had released scores — perhaps hundreds — of flying, chirping, swooping birds into the room.

Nick stepped back and simply stared. There were blackbirds and crows and ravens and martins and grackles, and in that moment of supreme confusion they had only one thing in common. They were all

black, all of varying intensities of night. Within minutes the waiting room was swarming with guards and detectives and servants, all trying to capture the birds or at least drive them outside. It was a fantastic, mind-bending sight, like something out of Kafka, and Nick could only stand in one comer and let the vision of it almost hypnotize him.

Finally, when the room had been cleared of all but the most persistent birds, Anson Gibellion remembered the ravens in their covered cage. He lifted one edge of the satin drape and peered inside, then shouted. “Velvet! Haskins! Come here! My ravens are gone!”

Nick looked past him into the large square cage. It was indeed empty.

During the next hour Nick found himself being questioned by a variety of Scotland Yard and government investigators, and there were moments when he imagined himself wasting away in a British prison for the rest of his days. The driver of the truck that had broken the window and released the birds was arrested as he tried to escape from the Palace courtyard on foot, but he proved to be a dim-witted foreigner who could barely speak English. He told of being hired and instructed the previous night by a bearded stranger, and furnished with a Gola Embassy pass to get him through the gate.

As the Scotland Yard people took him away for further questioning, Nick heard one detective on the phone, ordering checks of London pet shops for recent purchasers of black birds. Nick began to realize that the case was being treated with all the importance of a multiple murder. Only a few inexpensive birds had been stolen, but they’d been stolen from Buckingham Palace.

Presently Harry Haskins reappeared, looking grim from his own bout of having been questioned. He sat down next to Nick and said, “Well, I’ve got you off the hook, Velvet, but it took some doing. It seems Scotland Yard has a complete dossier on you, dating from the time you stole a toy mouse from a film studio in Paris. They were convinced this was your job, too, until I explained that you’d actually been hired to protect the birds.”

“I wasn’t too successful at that,” Nick admitted.

Anson Gibellion joined them then, his round face a weary web of wrinkles. “I am undone,” he told them sadly. “The President of my country is outraged that such a thing could happen under my very eyes. I am being recalled to Gola in disgrace.”

“I still can’t understand how it was accomplished,” Haskins said. “Were the ravens simply released to fly away with the others?”

Nick nodded. “Seven extra black birds weren’t even noticed in that mob scene.”

"But someone had to open the cage," Haskins insisted.

"Of course."

"But who?"

Nick shrugged. "Perhaps someone who entered from outside in the confusion."

"It sounds so simple," the Englishman said.

"It seems simple because it worked," Nick assured him. "But a great deal of careful planning must have gone into it"

Anson Gibellion gave Nick a curious look. "You talk as if you know how it was planned."

"It's a business with me," Nick told him. "I can admire another man's work."

He stood up, anxious to be out of there before more questioners arrived on the scene. "Where are you going?" Haskins asked.

"I'll be in touch."

"Needless to say, Velvet, you failed to earn your ten thousand pounds."

"Needless to say."

The girl was waiting for Nick at the place they'd agreed on, the bandstand near the zoo in Regent's Park. She wore a trim yellow raincoat as protection against the overcast skies, and her face was even more glowing than he remembered. "Hello," he said, coming up to her with a grin; he was dangling a large package from one hand.

"You're late. I didn't think you were coming." But he could see she was pleased by his arrival.

"Your British police are quite tenacious."

"Please! They're not *my* British police." She glanced around to see if anyone was watching, but there were only two elderly ladies chatting on a bench some distance away. "Did you get them, Nick? The ravens?"

He set the package on the grass and untied the string. Pulling away the paper he revealed a small square birdcage. "Seven ravens, as ordered."

She stared at the black birds in their crowded quarters and listened to their complaining cries. "I heard about it on the news," she told him. "It must have been quite a sight!"

"It was fun," Nick agreed.

"But once you released the ravens into that blizzard of birds, how did you ever sort them out again and recapture them?"

"That's a trade secret," he told her. "Do you have my money?"

"Mr. Stavanger has it."

"You mean I'll finally get to meet him?"

She smiled and shook her pretty head. "He's waiting in a car. I'll

take the birds to him." He knelt on the grass to cover the cage and retie the string.

"Just what sort of man is Stavanger?"

"Why do you ask?"

"I like to know who I've been working for. And why."

She sighed and picked up the packaged birdcage. "Stavanger is a revolutionary. Specifically, he is attempting to overthrow the government of Gola as a step toward establishing the country as a haven for other revolutionaries. He has built quite an extensive underground force in Gola, all ready to follow his lead."

"And how did you get involved with him?"

"I told you — he's a revolutionary like myself. He's anti-British, like myself. We have that much in common."

She led him along Broad Walk to Chester Road, where a closed black limousine stood waiting. "Is that Stavanger?" Nick asked.

"Yes. Please remain here while I take the birds to him. I'll return with your money."

"Can I be sure of that?"

"I'll be in plain sight all the time. I won't even get in the car. Now just you wait here."

He did as he was told and watched her cross the street to the waiting car. She opened a rear door and placed the packaged birdcage inside. The back windows were covered, so Nick could see only the uniformed driver. He suspected it might be a rented car and wondered if there was really anyone in the back seat at all. Perhaps Pat McGowan was merely a clever actress.

After a few moments of seemingly, earnest conversation she closed the door and walked back across the street to his side. The limousine pulled slowly away from the curb. "Here's your money," she told him, holding out a bulging brown envelope. "Mr. Stavanger was surprised that you were successful."

"I'll bet." Nick ripped open the envelope and riffled the comers of the ten-pound notes.

"Where will you go now, Nick? Back to America?"

He nodded, finishing his quick count of the money. "Why do you ask?"

"We could use you here, to fight for the Irish."

"Sorry. I never get involved in political disputes."

"Perhaps I'll see you again, nevertheless."

He smiled down at her eager eyes. "I hope so," he told her, and they parted.

Anson Gibellion was working at his desk when Nick entered through the window, dropped silently to the thick carpeting, and

closed the window behind him. The Ambassador turned, startled, and demanded, “How did you get in here, Velvet?”

Nick smiled and moved around the desk to a comfortable leather chair. “Your building is quite old and I’m something of a thief, remember?”

“Did you steal those birds? Did you cause all that trouble at the Palace?”

Nick shook his head. “No. As a matter of fact, I’ve come for my money. Harry Haskins offered me ten thousand pounds if I could prevent the ravens from being stolen.”

“What?” Gibellion didn’t seem to understand. “But you didn’t prevent it! The ravens were stolen!”

“On the contrary, Mr. Gibellion, the ravens were *not* stolen. When you brought the cage to the Palace today, the cage was empty. That business with all the birds was clever misdirection — but misdirection from a robbery that was *not* taking place.”

“You must be crazy!”

“Am I? The cage was covered for the presentation, and neither Haskins nor I actually saw those birds this morning. We were supposed to assume they were in the cage because you said so. I’d been visiting pet shops myself last night and had encountered an astonishing shortage of all kinds of black birds. When I discovered that someone had been buying them up, I wasn’t really too surprised to see the truck release them into the Palace — though I must admit it made quite a spectacle. I simply stood in a comer and watched — both the birds and that covered cage of yours. No one went near that cage, Gibellion. And yet later you claimed the birds were gone. The only possibility is that they were never in the cage in the first place.”

“But you are the thief, Velvet — not me!”

Nick shook his head. “Not this time. No one could seriously have suspected me of the crime, because I’d never been to the Palace before. I had no knowledge of which room we’d be in, so I could hardly have paid the dim-witted driver to back his truck into the correct window, could I? No, the driver was hired by someone who knew the Palace routine. It could have been Haskins, but when I determined the cage was empty all along, I knew it had to be you.”

“And so?”

“And so I want my money. No theft took place, so you owe me ten thousand pounds.”

“Your deal was with Haskins,” the Ambassador reminded him.

“But I’m collecting from you.”

Gibellion shook his head. “You’ve already collected your fee, Velvet. You were paid by the anti-Gola forces to steal the birds, and you collected from them this afternoon.”

Nick frowned at him across the desk. “I gather you’ve been talking with Stavanger.”

Gibellion shook his head. “You fail to fully comprehend the intricacy of the situation.” His hand came up from under the desk and it was holding a nickel-plated revolver pointed at Nick’s chest. “You see, *I* am Stavanger.”

Nick leaned back in the chair, keeping his voice casual. “That’s fine. Then I get paid twice by the same man.”

“Your payment is right here,” the Ambassador said, and the gun edged up a trifle. “You are a thief, Mr. Velvet. You have already robbed me of one payment — for seven false ravens you obviously obtained from a pet shop. I could hardly admit to the girl that I knew the birds were fakes, and so I had to pay for them.”

“Finding those birds last night was a harder job than stealing them,” Nick said. “I had to drive all the way to Greenwich to find a pet shop you hadn’t emptied for your little trick this morning. I’ll admit I was beginning to wonder about the identity of the man in the false beard who was buying black birds.”

“The birds were purchased over a period of several weeks. I have been planning this for some time.” The gun edged up another fraction.

“Before you shoot me, Gibellion, you could at least explain why you did it.”

“Why? There were two reasons, really. One was simply to embarrass the President of Gola on his visit here. But much more important, I wanted to discredit myself and force my recall back home. As Stavanger I have built up a complex underground system in Gola, an army of faithful revolutionaries waiting to follow me. But I am the only man who can lead them, and here I am in London, chained to an Ambassador’s desk. By allowing the theft to take place I incurred the President’s anger and will be sent home in disgrace — which is exactly what I wanted! It is far more effective and less suspicious than if I merely resigned. I will be back in Gola next week, ready to lead the revolution.”

Nick saw the Ambassador’s finger whiten on the trigger, and he tensed for a leap. Then suddenly the window through which he’d entered opened again, and the room was alive with birds. Gibellion jerked back in his chair as a bird darted in front of his eyes and circled toward the ceiling.

Nick waited no longer. He dove across the desk, knocking the gun away and pinning the Ambassador in his chair.

Pat McGowan entered through the window, wearing black slacks and a sweater, and looking that moment even more beautiful than Nick remembered. “The same bird trick,” he said with admiration.

She grinned, and took a little bow. “Stavanger’s driver told me he didn’t even want the birds. He left them in the limousine this afternoon. I brought them here to sell them back to Gibellion — anything for a little extra money — and overheard your conversation just now. I was as surprised as you to learn that Stavanger and Gibellion were the same man. I’d never seen the Ambassador before, not even in pictures.”

“I have to thank you for saving my life,” Nick told her. The birds were still swooping around the room, enjoying their freedom.

“I decided your life was worth saving,” she said.

Releasing his grip on Gibellion, Nick reminded him, “I believe you were about to pay me my fee. Ten thousand pounds.”

The Ambassador sputtered and struggled to his feet. Nick stood by his side as he removed the money from a wall safe. Behind him, Pat McGowan was trying to coax the birds back into their cage. “You’ve been paid twice for nothing,” Gibellion complained. “You didn’t steal the birds, and you didn’t prevent their theft.”

“But you now have fourteen ravens — these seven and your original seven. The extra birds should be worth the extra fee.” Nick grinned and pocketed the money without counting it. Then he took the girl’s hand and they left quickly by the window, before the Ambassador could retrieve his revolver.

“It looks as if I’m no longer working for Stavanger,” Pat remarked as they reached the next block.

“Just as well. Somehow I don’t think he really had much interest in your Irish matters.” He hailed a passing cab. “Let’s go somewhere for a quiet drink. I’ve already missed my plane.”

“What will happen to him now, Nick? To Gibellion, I mean.”

“Who knows? Maybe his brand of revolution is good for Gola. Maybe by next year he’ll be visiting the Queen himself, and she’ll get her seven ravens after all.”

The Borneo Snapshot Mystery
by James Holding{©1971 by James Holding.}

"Leroy King" rider again!

The years have passed — nearly five of them — since we've published a new adventure in deduction about our favorite mystery writing team (fictional). Surely you remember King Danforth and Martin Leroy, partners in crime (fictional), the famous literary collaboration known as "Leroy King," whose books have sold more than 125,000,000 copies throughout the world. Well, they and their lovely wives are still aboard the Valhalla *on their round-the-world cruise, and once again a shipboard mystery strikes. What is the meaning of the strange clue — the tiny colored glass spheres on the dead man's forehead? Strange clue indeed — but are the Great Men daunted? Not on your 'tec tintype — Leroy King rides again!*

❖

King Danforth couldn't sleep.

The Norwegian cruise ship *Valhalla,* in spite of her widely advertised stabilizers, was rolling heavily as she forged through the South China Sea toward Hong Kong. It was 5:30 in the morning; the *Valhalla* was forty hours out of Jesselton, North Borneo, her most recent port of call; and King lay in his bunk, wide-awake. His wife, Carol, was still asleep.

Without awakening her he slid out of bed, donned slacks, jersey, and sandals, quietly opened their cabin door, and emerged on the sun deck. A glance showed him that he had the ship to himself. Not even a Norwegian deckhand was in evidence. The rising sun revealed the eastern horizon as a faintly rosy undulating line between the sky and the heaving sea.

He walked aft, toward the sunrise, feeling proud of the sea legs he had acquired in half a hundred days at sea. He needed them this morning — to counter the unpredictable movements of the deck under his feet. Ten-foot seas, he judged, the aftermath of a week-old typhoon in whose wake they sailed.

Reaching the rail at the aft end of the sun deck, he decided to

descend to the main deck for his stroll and moved to the head of the railed staircase that led down to it.

It was just as he started down the stairs that he saw the body.

A man lay asprawl on the deck at the foot of the steps, supine, limbs slack and disordered, a macabre study in black and white: black hair, black dinner jacket, and black shoes; white face and ruffled white shirt front. King's instant conjecture was that some elderly or possibly drunken passenger, trying to negotiate the staircase in the heavy seas, had fallen headlong down the stairs.

He ran down the steps and bent over the man, feeling for a pulse and trying to recognize the upturned face. It was familiar but not one to which he could attach a name. Nor could he find a pulse in the thin wrist. When he looked at the man's face again, he understood why. A horizontal depression, deep enough to lay a finger in, ran across the man's forehead just below the hairline, with an area of bruised and dusty skin around it.

King rose slowly to his feet. No use listening for a heartbeat. That massive skull fracture left no doubt the man was dead.

When King and his wife joined Martin and Helen Leroy in the dining room for breakfast, King told them all about it. The Leroys were jolted by the news. The death of any member of a ship's company is always unsettling — a far more immediate reminder of man's mortality than a random death ashore.

"His name was Calvin Speaker, apparently," Danforth finished. "We've seen him around on the cruise — at informative talks and on shore excursions and so on. You know him, Mart?"

Leroy shook his head. "Calvin Speaker? Nope. Can't place him."

"Bushy guardsman-type mustache, long sideburns, patent-leather hair," Danforth said.

Helen spoke up. "I think I know who he was. Quite handsome in a dark saturnine way. He used to sit beside the dance floor evenings, drinking Brandy Alexanders and staring at me a lot."

Her husband chuckled. "Everybody does," he said. He was proud of her good looks.

"He was traveling alone," Danforth said, "according to the passenger list. Mr. Calvin Speaker from Sacramento."

Carol murmured, "Poor man! It's sad to die alone and so far away from home."

Martin Leroy gave his partner a curious look. "Listen, King, how come this news hasn't hit the ship's rumor mill yet?"

"The doctor asked me to keep it quiet until next of kin is notified and official cause of death determined — you know the routine. Then the Captain will announce it."

“Cause of death!” Helen caught him up. “I thought you said he fell down the steps and cracked his head.”

“Yeah,” Martin Leroy said. “Didn’t he?”

“The doctor thinks so.”

“Don’t you?” Leroy stared at his friend. “What are you hinting at?”

Helen curled her beautiful lips. “Now don’t tell me there’s something mysterious about *this!* Just because you two write mystery stories, you surely aren’t looking for a plot in a poor lonely man falling down the stairs!”

King rubbed a big hand over his hair and reached for another piece of toast. “There were a couple of odd things about Calvin Speaker’s death.”

“Odd?” Leroy asked.

“The guy still had his dinner jacket on, for one thing.”

“At five-thirty this morning?”

“Right.” On the *Valhalla* it was *de rigueur* to dress for dinner every night at sea except Sundays.

“What else?” asked Leroy.

“He had dust on his forehead.”

Helen said, “You’re trying to make something out of *that?”*

Danforth put marmalade on his toast and shrugged.

Leroy said, “Because he still had his dinner jacket on, King, you think he fell down the stairs last night?”

Danforth nodded.

“So what’s odd about that?” Helen wanted to know.

“If he fell down the steps last night, the night watchman or a deckhand should have found him long before I did this morning. They scrub down the decks every night, you know. And the night watchman makes four complete rounds of the ship, inside and out, every night.”

Leroy nodded. “And what’s odd about Speaker having dust on his forehead?”

“Yes,” his wife chimed in, “isn’t it perfectly natural for a man who falls down a whole flight of steps to get some dust on his head?”

Danforth answered almost reluctantly. “Not on this ship, it isn’t. They keep it cleaner than a baby’s crib. I rubbed my finger over those stair treads this morning and got no dust at all. Not a speck.”

Leroy, munching his third buckwheat cake, said, “Excellent procedural technique, my boy. Under the circumstances I agree that dust was extremely odd. What did Dr. Hagen say?”

“He didn’t say what he was obviously thinking — that I was out of my skull to ask about a spot of dust on a dead man’s forehead.”

Helen gave King a dazzling smile. “My respect for the doctor rises, darling. He’s a fine diagnostician to recognize you so quickly as

a mental case."

"Thanks." Danforth grinned. "I love it when you're sweet to me like that. Is Helen sweet to you too, Mart?"

"Never," Leroy confessed. "But then, she's my wife."

Carol snapped, "Stop that horrible joking when poor Mr. Speaker is hardly cold yet!"

"You bring up an important point," Leroy said. "How about that, King? Any *rigor mortis* when you found him?"

"Some. Dr. Hagen thought it was ghoulish of me to ask about that too."

"I like the doctor better all the time," Helen said.

King continued, "So I compromised. I suppressed my curiosity about *rigor mortis* and settled for a promise from the doc that he'd take a look at that funny gray dust on Speaker's forehead."

"You mean under a microscope?"

"Exactly. And report his findings—" Danforth looked toward the dining-room entrance. "There's Dr. Hagen now. Excuse me." He got up and went over to the doorway. The others watched him greet the tall ship's doctor. Dr. Hagen said something to Danforth, then shook his head and turned away. King came back to the table and sat down. "He had to get back to the sick bay."

Leroy said, "How about the dust on Speaker's forehead?"

"You'll never guess what it was."

"I will," Carol said. "I figured it out long ago. Dandruff."

"Quiet, woman," Leroy commanded, "while two mature minds wrestle with this odd discrepancy in an otherwise run-of-the-mill accident. Well, King?"

"The dust on Speaker's forehead seemed to consist of — get this — tiny colored glass spheres."

Silence greeted this announcement. Then Helen said, "There goes my newfound respect for the doctor. He's a mental case himself."

"Did he say anything else, King?" Leroy asked.

"Just not to bother him anymore. In a nice way, of course."

Martin Leroy said with the enthusiasm of the true puzzle-solver, "What, may I ask, are a bunch of microscopic glass spheres doing on board a ship at sea, let alone on a dead man's forehead?"

"How about that glassy powder on a nail file?" Carol offered. "You know, like sandpaper?"

"Or some of that shiny stuff in a city sidewalk? Mica, is it?" Helen said.

Danforth shook his head. "Sorry, ladies. They aren't spheres. And besides, the doctor said *colored* glass spheres. Red, blue, and green."

"Oh, colored!" Helen was undismayed. "How about some of the stuff on one of those sparkly masks they wear in Rio for the Carnival?"

Leroy suddenly put down his fork with a clatter. His dark eyes glowed. “Please,” he begged, “will you dispense with these childish guessing games for a moment? And let the genius in your midst be heard?”

“Mart, you know what the dust is?”

“I thought you’d never ask. Of course I know what it is. Anyone with a reasonably keen interest in amateur photography would know. At least,” he amended with a broad deprecatory smile, “anyone who has total recall like me.”

“Total recall!” Helen scoffed. “Why, you can’t even remember your social-security number!”

Danforth said, “Please ignore your unappreciative wife, Mart. What’s the dust?”

Leroy narrowed his eyes dramatically. “The dust is the material they coat on home movie screens.”

“Hey!” Danforth exclaimed. “Now you mention it, I think that’s it. To make the surface reflective, right?”

“We’re very impressed,” Carol said, “but so what?”

Her husband answered, “It just might mean that Calvin Speaker *didn’t* fall down those steps at all.”

“Here we go again!” Helen moaned. “You mean he may have been murdered, I suppose?”

“Maybe. Or at least killed somewhere else than on that staircase.”

“Like where?”

“Like somebody’s cabin where there’s a home movie screen.”

“I can see what’s coming next,” Carol announced. “Killed last night in somebody’s cabin where there’s a home movie screen, kept in the cabin all night, then brought out on deck and pushed down those steps to make it look like an accident.”

“You’re beginning to learn, my dear,” said Leroy. “No doubt by association with your brilliant husband, my partner. But that *would* account for the dinner jacket at daybreak and the dust on the forehead.”

Helen laughed. “I can think of another way to account for the dinner jacket. And not necessarily involving a movie screen, either.”

“You mean he spent the night in some blonde’s cabin?” her husband asked. “Some sordid shipboard intrigue. Forget it. We’ve got a great clue here that could mean murder. So let’s not get side-tracked by romance.”

“Spoken like a true mystery fan,” agreed Danforth. “So who on board would have a home movie screen in his cabin?”

“Almost anybody,” Helen said.

“No, it’s unlikely that any of the passengers would bring a movie screen on a cruise. Cameras, yes. Screen, no.”

"How about the crew?" Carol suggested.

Her husband shook his head. "Not likely."

"Listen." Leroy took over. "How about narrowing it down, for the nonce, to the *likeliest* possibility?"

"The ship's photographer," Danforth said. "Okay."

"Gregory?" Helen asked. "That nice youngster?"

"That nice youngster with a movie screen in his cabin which I have personally seen."

"But he wouldn't *kill* anyone!"

"I don't think he would, either," Leroy murmured. "All the same I'd like to examine Gregory's movie screen."

After breakfast they took a leisurely turn around the promenade deck. As they passed the bulletin board on which the ship's photographer posted the candid shots he took during shore excursions, Danforth said, "Wait a minute. Mart. Maybe there's a picture of Calvin Speaker here." They stopped and scanned the rows of photographs pinned to the board.

The latest batch covered the *Valhalla's* visit to Jesselton, North Borneo. The Leroys and Danforths had already seen the display — had, indeed, ordered two prints from the ship's photographer as keepsakes of the cruise: a shot of the four of them grouped around a heavy-homed water buffalo.

The whole Jesselton shore trip was represented. Tanjong Aru beach, from which had been visible the towering jungled mountain on which the fast-disappearing orangutan was making its last stand against extinction; the unicorn and lion dances performed by Malay and Chinese children; the rubber plantations, rice fields, native villages; the water-buffalo races at Penampang; the exhibition of blowgun marksmanship by a Murut native. In almost every scene one or more cruise passengers appeared, but in none of them could they spot the face of Mr. Calvin Speaker.

Leroy indicated an empty space in one of the rows of photographs. "There's no picture number 432," he said with a quick glance at Danforth, "although apparently there *was* one, judging from the thumbtack hole in the board."

Flanking the empty space were two pictures — numbers 431 and 433 — of cruise passengers standing beside the naked Murut tribesman who had demonstrated the accuracy of his blowgun by placing breath-expelled darts neatly in a small pig-shaped target forty yards away. The savage, flamboyant in feathered plumes and nothing else, was selling blowguns to the fascinated tourists from a small bundle of guns at his feet.

"Do you suppose," asked Danforth carefully, "that the missing

photo number 432 could be a picture of Calvin Speaker? And that it has been, for some unknown reason, removed from this display?"

"There's one way to find out," Leroy replied. "And we wanted to look at Gregory's movie screen anyway."

King cleared his throat. "May we meet you two charmers in our deck chairs shortly?" he said to the wives. "We are about to undertake negotiations of the utmost delicacy and can't permit ourselves to be distracted by two beautiful women."

With the haughty air of dowagers denied an invitation to the fete of the season, Carol and Helen went off to their deck chairs while Leroy and Danforth thoughtfully made their way to the ship's photographer's cabin-cum-dark-room on the main deck.

Danforth knocked. After a moment Gregory opened the door halfway and peered out into the corridor. "Yes?" he inquired. Then he recognized them, and his somewhat distraught expression sharpened into a welcoming smile. "What can I do for you?"

"May we come in for a minute, Greg?" Leroy asked. "Got a little problem."

"Sure." Gregory stepped aside and they went in past him. He waved at his bunk. "Sit down. What's your problem? Do you need a photographic consultant on your next plot?" Like almost everyone on the *Valhalla,* Gregory knew that his two visitors were the famous literary collaboration known as "Leroy King," whose books have sold more than 125,000,000 copies throughout the world. "If so, I'm your man."

Danforth and Leroy ranged themselves side by side on the edge of his bunk. Gregory remained standing, his back to the door. "We've got two problems, actually," Danforth said.

Gregory, faintly red of eye and uneasy of manner, said, "Let's have 'em. I'll present my bill for expert advice later." He was obviously keeping it light.

Leroy said, "First problem: I want to show some color slides in my cabin. May I borrow your movie screen?"

Gregory shook his head regretfully. "I'm sorry, but it's broken, Mr. Leroy. Fell over during the rough seas last night and got a tear in it."

"Oh? A bad one?"

"Pretty bad. Too big a tear to be of much use, I'm afraid. Look, I'll show you." Gregory stooped and pulled a rolled-up screen from under the bunk. "I had it set up in here last night to run through a few of my own slides," he explained, "and a big wave tipped it over." He pulled the screen out of its cylindrical metal housing. "See?"

There was a long rough-edged slit near the center of the unrolled screen.

Leroy said, “Some of the reflective coating has even been knocked off.” He pointed to the tear in the screen. “See that smooth spot?” He stood up as though to leave. “Well, thanks anyway, Greg.”

“Wait a minute, Mart,” said Danforth. “I want to ask about that picture.”

Leroy sat down again. Gregory moved his feet restlessly on the carpet. “What picture?” Gregory inquired.

Danforth said, “I want to order a print of picture number 432, Greg. From the prom deck bulletin board.”

With a brusque movement Gregory pushed himself away from the door against which he was leaning. His ruddy face lost some of its color. With a visible effort he said, “What number was that, Mr. Danforth?”

“432.”

“432? What do you want with that one? My whole 430 series just shows the Borneo blowgun man with various passengers, that’s all. You weren’t in any of them.”

Danforth said slowly, “I want a picture of Calvin Speaker, Greg. He was a very nice chap, we all thought.” Very slightly he emphasized the past tense.

Gregory slumped against the door bonelessly and closed his eyes for a moment. Leroy and Danforth watched him in silence. At length the photographer said, “I should have had better sense. When I saw you two at the door I had a feeling you knew. But damn it, I didn’t kill him!”

“Didn’t you?” Leroy asked softly.

“No! But who’ll believe me?”

“Maybe we will. Why’d you fake the accident if you didn’t kill him — the falling-down-the-stairs bit?”

Gregory licked his lips. “Why? Isn’t it obvious? What do you think my job on this ship would be worth if I naively reported to the Captain that one of his passengers was lying dead of a fractured skull on the floor of my cabin? I’d be blacklisted forever as a ship’s photographer, even if they didn’t charge me with murder, for God’s sake! Don’t you realize that on a cruise the passenger is always right, the staff member never?” He rubbed a hand over his eyes, a gesture that emphasized his youth and vulnerability, “How’d you find out about the screen and picture number 432?”

Danforth told him. At the end Gregory said. “It *would* be my luck that you found the body. You, of all people. A detective-story writer, for God’s sake!”

Danforth said grimly, “If you didn’t kill Speaker, who did?”

“He killed himself, you might say.” Gregory told the story in a monotone. At midnight the previous night, needing fresh film to

photograph a birthday party in the bar, he had returned to his cabin and met Speaker just leaving it with one of Gregory's negatives in his hand. Quite naturally Gregory asked him what the hell he was doing in his cabin, meanwhile snatching the negative from him, pushing him back into the cabin, and closing the door.

Speaker had tried to apologize. Then, getting no encouragement from Gregory, he had surprisingly tried to buy the negative, offering Gregory one hundred dollars for it. This sum was so large that suspicion was immediately added to Gregory's anger, and he refused to sell. Whereupon Speaker, in a sudden fury, lunged across the narrow stateroom, intent, Gregory thought, on taking the negative from Gregory by force. His movement happened to coincide with a violent lurch of the ship in the heavy seas that were running, with the result that he was catapulted across the room, his head striking first against the movie screen erected at the foot of Gregory's bunk, and then, with sickening force, against the edge of the bunk.

"That's the God's truth," Gregory finished. "So help me. Do you believe me?"

Danforth answered obliquely. "Why'd you wait until dawn to dump him at the foot of the steps? His dinner jacket was what made me suspicious in the first place."

"Oh, lord!" Gregory said, stricken. "I never thought of the dinner jacket! The night steward was polishing passengers' shoes across from my door nearly all night long. I couldn't carry Speaker's body out of here until the steward went away."

"Where's the negative that Speaker was so anxious to get hold of?" Leroy asked. "Picture number 432, I suppose?"

"Yeah. Here it is." The photographer reached into a file beside the door. "Along with a print I made of it while I was waiting for the steward to leave last night. I thought it might explain Speaker's interest in it, but it's not much help. Just shows Speaker with the Borneo blowgun man."

Danforth stood up. "Let us have it for a while, will you?"

"Sure, take it." Gregory handed the print to Leroy. "You going to report me to the Captain? I suppose you have to."

"Not right away," Leroy answered after a glance at Danforth. "What do you say, King? Speaker's dead. And Greg can't go anywhere till we get to our next port, anyway. Personally I'm inclined to believe him about Speaker's death."

With Gregory's thanks echoing in their ears they went to their deck chairs on the lee side of the boat deck. Here, while Danforth told the girls about their talk with Gregory, Leroy studied Gregory's candid picture of Calvin Speaker and the naked blowgun marksman.

When Danforth finished his account he turned to his partner.

"Does the photo give us anything?"

Leroy handed the print to Carol. "Just another tourist picture. Calvin Speaker buying one of those blowguns from the Murut."

Carol looked at the picture, passed it on to Helen. After a moment Helen said, "Speaker isn't looking at the Murut or his blowgun, really. He's looking over his shoulder, as if to see whether or not anyone's watching him."

"And smoothing back his hair with one hand," Danforth added.

"He looks sort of uneasy to me," Carol remarked.

"Why, for Pete's sake, would he be uneasy?" Danforth asked. "Buying a blowgun from a native isn't that shameful."

"The native is naked," pointed out Carol primly.

"Let me have a look," Danforth said. He took the print from Helen. After examining it he said, "Speaker not only looks uneasy he looks *different* somehow."

"Different?" asked Leroy.

"Yeah. Different from the way he looked this morning when I found him at the foot of the steps."

"He was dead this morning," Carol reminded him. "And he was alive in that picture. There's a pretty big difference, if you ask me."

"I don't mean that. I mean Speaker's *appearance* is different in this picture."

"Let me have another look," Helen said. "I'm the only one of us who seems to have noticed poor Mr. Speaker before today."

Danforth handed her the photograph. She looked at it in silence. Then she turned to Danforth. "His forehead is too high," she said.

Danforth snatched the picture. "That's it — that's what's different. A higher forehead. His face seems too thin and long between those sideburns."

"Impossible," said Leroy. "A man's forehead doesn't expand or contract in a matter of forty-eight hours, King! Perhaps having his hand on his head in the picture changes the visual impression of his face."

Carol spoke up in a challenging tone. "I just thought of something," she said, "and I don't want either of you geniuses to take credit for it. Okay?"

"Okay." Danforth grinned at her. "The credit is entirely yours for whatever it is you've thought of. What is it?"

Carol said, "There *is* a way a man's forehead can grow higher—"

"I know how!" said Helen suddenly.

Carol went on as though she had not been interrupted. "I'll try not to be too technical about this, but when one is dealing with rudimentary intelligences—"

"Come on, come on," Leroy urged her. "What you're trying to say

is that Speaker wore a hairpiece, aren't you? And in this picture the hairpiece has slipped *back* on his head a bit?"

"What I'm trying to say," Carol exclaimed with an indignant look at Leroy, "is that I'm going to join Women's Lib! Tomorrow!"

Danforth stared at the picture in his hand. "By George, that's it, Mart! Speaker's not smoothing back his hair — he's trying to hold it on! Or trying to resettle his hairpiece farther forward on his forehead!"

Leroy nodded. "It must have come loose from its moorings during the Borneo shore excursion."

"Poor Mr. Speaker was bald!" Helen said. "No wonder he's embarrassed in the picture. If your hairpiece suddenly came unstuck —"

Thoughtfully Leroy said, "Embarrassed? I'm not sure that's the right word."

"Why not?" demanded Carol. "Here's a man who wears a wig to conceal his baldness from his fellow passengers. And suddenly his wig comes loose. Wouldn't you be embarrassed?" Danforth, still studying the snapshot, said, "I'd say Mr. Speaker looks more *scared* than embarrassed."

"Scared?" Helen said. "Why would he be scared? Or who would he be scared of?"

"There you have me," said Danforth. "But it's, certainly not the blowgun salesman, naked or not."

"In view of the circumstances surrounding his demise," suggested Leroy, "I'd say he was scared of having his picture taken with his wig at half mast."

"Why?" asked Carol.

"Because he didn't want to be seen that way. To avoid it he was willing to try theft, bribery, assault, and possibly even murder on Gregory. Just to keep this picture out of circulation."

"Why?" asked Carol. "This is the last time I'll ask you."

"For fear somebody who saw this picture might recognize him. That seems to be obvious." Danforth gazed over the rail at the long foam-capped swells that paraded by the ship. "Recognize his true identity, that is."

"Whoa!" Helen said. "Are you saying that Calvin Speaker *wasn't* Calvin Speaker? That he was somebody else?"

"Could be," said Leroy judiciously. "Very probable, in fact. Give me another look at that picture, King." Then, after a moment's study, "The sideburns and mustache could be fake, too."

"Or recently grown," added Danforth, "to go with the wig."

Leroy brooded over the photograph in his hand. "At this point I could bear to take a look at Calvin Speaker's remains. Couldn't you?"

"We'd better go to the Captain, then," said Danforth, "because Dr. Hagen has had me and my curiosity up to here by now. He'll defend his domain from us with drawn sword, I'm afraid, unless the Captain intercedes."

At pre-luncheon cocktails Leroy and Danforth reported to their wives.

"Captain Thorsen went with us," Danforth said, "so the doctor grudgingly let us look at Speaker before they put him in the — er — ship's freezer."

"Ghouls!" said Helen, shivering.

"The sideburns are genuine, but the mustache was fake, it turned out," said Leroy.

"So Calvin Speaker *wasn't* Calvin Speaker?"

"Right," said Leroy. He smiled at his wife.

She put her head on one side and regarded him narrowly. "You want me to ask who Calvin Speaker really was, don't you?"

"Please," said her husband, still smiling.

"All right, who was he?" Helen obliged him. "Anybody we know?"

"Nobody *we* know," said Danforth. "But old Mr. Total Recall, *he* knew him all right — once the doctor removed the wig and mustache."

Leroy nodded complacently. "It was child's play for me to identify this bald character known to us as Calvin Speaker."

Carol and Helen knew they were being baited. They also knew that Leroy *did* have an excellent memory. So his wife couldn't resist repeating her question: "Who *was* Calvin

Speaker, Mart?"

"Clark Anselm," said Leroy.

Helen looked blank. So did Carol. "Who on earth is Clark Anselm?" Carol finally asked.

"Number Three on the F.B.I.'s most-wanted list, that's who," Danforth explained. "The bank robber who blew up the City Savings and Trust in San Francisco four months ago. Killing two people in the process. And escaping scot-free with eighty-some thousand dollars of the bank's money. Mart recognized him from seeing his picture in the newspapers at the time."

"That sweet Calvin Speaker a bank robber?" Helen protested.

"Then why do you suppose he was carrying sixty-seven thousand dollars in cash with him on this cruise?" Leroy asked. "Captain Thorsen had his cabin searched, at our suggestion, and they found big bundles of U.S. currency stashed away all over the joint."

"The money from the bank?"

“Most of it, anyway,” Leroy grinned at his wife. “I also remembered, fortunately, that a reward of five thousand dollars was offered for Clark Anselm’s apprehension.”

“Whee!” Helen crowed. “Order us another drink, Carol — I think we’ve just earned ourselves five thousand dollars!”

Danforth shook his head. “Sorry, ladies. The reward is for someone more deserving.”

“If you mean who I think you mean, I *will* join Women’s Lib!” said Carol indignantly. “Leroy King?”

“Wrong again,” Danforth said. “Gregory. The ship’s photographer. He’ll get the reward if they take our recommendation. After all, he’s the one who really exposed Anselm.”

No one laughed at the pun. Helen rocked in her chair as though in pain. “There goes our five thousand dollars!” she moaned. “Excuse me, will you, while I put on my sackcloth dress and throw dust on my head?”

“Forget the dust on the head, darling,” advised Leroy. “Remember what happened to Calvin Speaker.”

Criminalimerick

You Know My Methods, Don't You?
by D. R. Bensen{© 1971 by D. R. Bensen.}

The client's confused and distraught,
But Holmes sees the problem is fraught
With amusing details
And — it never once fails —
Some lessons that Watson gets taught.

Mr. Anonymous
by Lika Van Ness{© 1971 by Lika Van Ness.}

Department of "First Stories"

This is the 362nd "first story" to be published by Ellery Queen's Mystery Magazine… a subtle, tantalizing story that clutches you at the end, won't let you go, won't let you pull away…

The author, Lika Van Ness, has not told us much about herself. She is a New York journalist whose off-work hours are spent exploring the city, seeing new movies, cooking, reading, writing — and "wondering where the time went."

Some of the time, we hope, will go into writing more short stories…

❖

Wednesday: Jerry's left for the office and I can breathe. I wish I could sleep late and avoid these breakfast squabbles, but I can't — and I won't pretend to either. The only silver lining to insomnia is seeing the sun come up and I'm not about to deny myself *that* or the first cup of coffee from the pot, or first look at *The Times.* The skyline this morning was like an overexposed photograph, the buildings charcoal-green against the first light. But dawn in New York is always breathtaking. It's my favorite time of day. Immediately followed by my least favorite: breakfast with my husband.

His putdown this morning was you, Diary. Why would a grown woman confide in a book instead of a friend? Why don't I discuss more with him if I have so much to say? Well, I'd much rather discuss things with you than with him, and friends are hooey. And of course there are things I can share with you that I can't with him or with anyone. You're my seventh veil.

Well, I'm not going to let it ruin my day. Life is too short and there are wonders to enjoy. I'm meeting Stephen at the museum at 11:00. Now that it's summer I don't have to work at the gallery on Wednesdays or Fridays. I wish it would stay July forever. I love everything about summer — fewer clothes, fewer working hours, fewer people in the city. Alex, dearly as I love him, off to camp. The hum of the air conditioners. Walking where I want to go instead of

depending on the miserable transportation in this city. The trees green, the air heavy and sweet, everyone rested and healthy and expectant. The freedom. The possibilities.

Friday: Jerry and I are going to Montauk for the weekend. To his surprise I agreed with him at breakfast that we should get off together and try to recapture what we seem to be losing. And why not? Stephen has gone to New Jersey on some marksmen's convention or other. His preoccupation with guns is the only thing about him that disturbs me. I'm jealous, I suppose. But better guns than another woman.

Sunday: Montauk is a disaster. The inn is full of lovers and last night Jerry and I sat like wooden Indians over the candlelit mousse while seduction bloomed all around us. But this morning I got chills in my stomach watching the surf and then I took a lovely long walk down the beach. The huddled vegetation, the piny smoke, the cold sea air. If I were really free I'd have a house on a beach someplace where it's always summer.

Returning to the inn I noticed a large family group picnicking behind a sand dune under a purple umbrella. Everyone in the group, young and old, wore a different kind of hat. They were like something out of *Juliet of the Spirits.* I had an urge to paint them but lost it when I spotted Jerry walking toward me from the inn. He too had seen the family and had such a soupy expression on his face that I just couldn't bear it. How quickly he would have *us* raising a family that size and moving to St. Louis to be near his parents. He never misses an opportunity to get the message across.

I walked back here with him in silence and immediately reached for you. Until then he hadn't known I'd brought you along. He turned pale and left. I hope I won't see him again until it's time to leave.

Tuesday: I thought Jerry would be more quarrelsome than ever after his failed weekend, but he has been very quiet at breakfast. At dinner, too. I found myself tonight making small talk to fill in the silence, but I'm not going to do it again. Let him be uncomfortable. Let him stew.

Wednesday: I had a vile phone call this morning just after Jerry left for the office. It was more threatening than obscene and I hung up immediately, but I had the impression it was someone I know — or someone I have known. But who would get any kick out of threatening me? I mind my own business — when people let me.

Thursday: Stephen didn't show up at the museum yesterday. He's usually waiting in the garden when I arrive, but he wasn't there. I waited and searched until 1:00, then phoned his office — no answer — and his home, but the phone rang and rang. Ruth must have been out organizing another charity ball.

It must be terrible trying to fill your days when you're too rich to work, especially when that's what your husband married you for.

Friday: Still no word from Stephen, and I can't reach him. I don't know whether to be worried or furious. Could he have met with an accident last weekend? Why isn't Ruth at home? Those wretched guns of his!

At the gallery yesterday the honorable and prim-seeming Mr. Plum was in a black mood about something. (You and I know better, don't we, Diary, about how honorable Rafael Plum is when it comes to art dealers and how prim when it comes to his women employees.) Perhaps someone has beaten him at his own game. Whatever it is, I hope he is over it by Monday. It is no pleasure being there when he is like that, I assure you.

Monday: For the first time since we were married eight years ago, I wish Jerry and I had more friends to invite in. Superficial as friends are, they would fill this terrible silence he has been imposing on us for over a week now. Blessedly though, he is working late tonight and I won't have to sit through a wordless dinner with him.

He went to the office early this morning to do some homework. I thought homework was work you did at home, but that's what he called it.

There is still no answer at Stephen's office or at his house, and no word from him. Could he have gone away on vacation without letting me know? Maybe he's away on unexpected business.

Mr. Plum is still spreading a dark cloud, and his ill humor seems especially directed at me. Well, I don't care. If he has a grievance he can tell me outright. Or doesn't he dare?

It would be helpful to ask Myra or Jean if they know what's behind it, but I'd rather die than go to them. I wonder if it's in any way connected with Stephen, who usually comes by the gallery several times a week but to my knowledge hasn't been in for two weeks.

Tuesday: I received another of those disgusting phone calls this morning. The caller is definitely a man and he gave me reason to believe he knows things about me that only someone who truly knows me would. I'd tell Jerry about him but the caller mentioned Stephen,

and others besides Stephen.

Now I'll worry every time Jerry answers the phone.

A second phone call, right on the heels of the first, was almost as disturbing but in a different way. It was Linda Hatfield, my roommate on East 66th Street, around the comer from the gallery, before Jerry and I were married. Since Jerry was dating her before he met me, it has been too awkward to keep up the acquaintance.

I don't think she has ever married — she identified herself on the phone as Linda Hatfield. She probably hasn't ever moved from the old apartment because I often run into her on my way to and from the gallery. I give her a cool reception, too, yet she called to ask me if I'd like to attend a matinee with her tomorrow afternoon. She has an extra ticket that her theater partner can't use, and suddenly she thought to ask me. Isn't that pathetic? Can you imagine anything more deadly than attending a matinee every week, come hell or high water? God, she must be lonely.

I told her that although I do have Wednesdays off, I couldn't possibly get out of a previous commitment. She sounded disappointed. Oh, well, "Here's to the ladies who lunch…"

Wednesday: It's only midmorning and I've just hung up from the third anonymous phone call in an hour. It does no good to hang up and then not answer the inevitable ringing that follows — he would let it ring forever. These calls are the same as the others, only worse. His insinuating voice, the same recital of facts reminding me I'm not just a name in the phone book. Describing my addiction to objets d'art, expensive clothes, perfume, and gin. Repeating the details of my parents' suicide, of my estrangement with my brother, Judge Peter W. Daniels of Denver, Colorado. He knows Jerry is a lawyer and that we have an eight-year-old son named Alex and no pets. That I was pregnant before Jerry and I were married.

Who could possibly know all these things — and who has nothing better to do than remind me of them? Who could be so cruel? Or so sick?

Linda Hatfield? But it's a man. Maybe she has a sick boy friend and this is how they get their jollies.

Who else has a grudge against me? The TV repairman? Forget it, he couldn't possibly know these things — unless he got a look at you, and that's unlikely. It couldn't be that insipid neighbor with the Tyrolean hat who has been flinging epithets at me ever since I sent him the cleaner's bill for the dress his Weimaraner soiled on the elevator. Myra? Jean? No, if I read them correctly they're too cool, too busy with their own lives. No, these people are too irrelevant. It's somebody else. It's somebody I *know.* Somebody I'm overlooking…

Thursday: Rafael Plum called me into his office this afternoon and asked for my resignation. After ten years! When I asked him why, he shrugged. The economy, he said with no particular effort to sound convincing. The bad times.

Let Myra go, I told him. Or Jean. They were both hired years after I was.

They're indispensable, he said, and working full-time. Besides, he added, he has been receiving complaints from important clients about my rudeness and off-handedness. That's a lie, of course. I bend over backwards to be charming and helpful to every one of our customers, whether they are important or not.

All right, I told him, for some reason you want me out. I don't care about the job. I grew tired of it long ago and won't have a moment's trouble getting a better one within five blocks of here. But I'm amazed you think you can fire me. Some well chosen words from me and you will be out of business, in jail, explaining yourself to a long line of husbands, or all three! How can you possibly think you can fire me?

He looked at me for a long time through those blue-tinted glasses of his. All right, he said finally, we'll talk about it again on Monday. Meantime he'd like to know — how much would I consider fair severance pay?

I told him to guess — to make it a careful guess, and to make it in cash.

Saturday: Alex just phoned from camp. He was crying and said he was going to run away. Jerry went to the office this morning on some important business, but I told Alex to sit tight and his father and I would be up to get him, by tomorrow noon at the very latest.

I phoned Jerry at the office and he's not there. I tried to reach Mr. Crosscup, the director of the camp, and he and his assistant are out with the 8-10 year olds on an overnight hike. The secretary said that Alex is with them and they are beyond reach of a phone. I told her that couldn't be strictly true because I had received a phone call from my son within the past five minutes. She said she would send one of the counselors after the group and will call me back when she has some word.

I'm not going to wait around forever to hear from her or from Jerry. If Jerry isn't home in an hour, I'm going up there without him.

Monday: I drove up to Echo Lake without Jerry on Saturday. The counselor had caught up with the overnight group and Alex and the director came back with him to the camp. Alex looked at me as if he

had never seen me before in his life. He insisted he had made no call and Mr. Crosscup assured me with infuriating courtesy that there was no possible way Alex could have got to a telephone from where they had been in the mountains. I told him I had never agreed that my child should be so far out of reach of civilization, whereupon he produced a paper Jerry had signed allowing Alex to go on overnight hikes and canoe trips no farther than twenty-four hours' distance from modern communications.

Alex and I took a walk and I pleaded with him to return to New York with me, but he refused flat out. He doesn't like Jerry and me, he said — he hates us. At first he wouldn't tell me why. Then he did.

Did you call me all the way up here to say these terrible things, I asked him. I *didn't* call you up here, he screamed, and ran away from me into the woods. I let him go. I've got to think before I try talking to him again. I hated my parents, but they gave me nothing. Jerry and I give Alex everything.

Could my son be insane, as my parents were? They say mental illness skips a generation. It certainly skipped ours. Peter has behaved hatefully toward me since we settled the estate but he's a judge, after all, and what could be more stable?

I forgot to tell you on Saturday that Stephen called, right on the heels of the call from Alex, wanting to see me and explain his absence. I told him I was on my way upstate to see Alex and had no time to talk to him.

I didn't go to the gallery today. Rafael will have to wait until tomorrow for our talk. But it won't be pleasant, and I'm aching for a pleasant conversation with *somebody.*

Tuesday: Rafael and I have had our talk and I walked out with $5000. It's a ridiculously small amount, but he knows very well that I will call on him when I am in need of more.

I took a long walk in the heat, away from the apartment — it is so morbidly silent these days except for that bitchy phone. I walked all the way from the gallery down to lower Broadway. It's a long way but I've always been a great walker. By the time I realized where I was, I was thirsty and stopped at a bar. I forget its name, but I remember that it had a friendly old mirror over the bar and that I stayed for quite a while. It was dark when I returned to the apartment — dark and empty.

What is keeping Jerry so busy these days? He is never here for meals anymore and often he doesn't even come home to sleep. I'd suspect an affair, but that would be impossible with Jerry. He's too much of a family man at heart. Besides, he adores me. It's a very cold proposition, adoration, but I will live with it until it suits me to move

on.

Wednesday: The phone woke me before 5:00 this morning. Jerry wasn't home yet and I thought it would be he, but it was Mr. Anonymous. When he started in about me I hung up and went to the kitchen to make some coffee. When the phone rang again, I let it ring until I couldn't stand it anymore and had to pick up the receiver.

Your husband wants a divorce, he said.

I'll kill him first, I thought. How would you know? I asked him.

I know everything about you, he sneered. I know about your husband, who wants a divorce at any cost, and about Stephen, who means you no more good than you mean him, and about your brother who hates you and your son who hates you. I know that you have no friends, nor really any friendly acquaintances. I know that you've lost your job and have $5000 that you stupidly haven't deposited in the bank.

That's not true, I said.

It's true, he assured me. I saw you at the bar yesterday. And you saw me. I learned several new things about you. I had known that you drink too much but I hadn't yet realized that you talk too much to strangers and you wear too much perfume. Funny how when you get better acquainted with some women they lose their appeal.

I reached out to shut his voice off in a hurry. Don't hang up! he commanded. That stopped me and I waited.

That's better, he said.

I held my breath. He didn't speak for more than two minutes by the wall clock.

Okay then, he said. I'll be over.

And he hung up.

That was a half hour ago. I've packed a suitcase, which I've left open on the bed, with the money in it, and the small revolver Stephen gave me. I'm not sure what's going to happen next, but it's clear I can't stay here. But where will I go? Oh, I need time. I need more time to think.

Who could it be? Who knows all these things about me? Who could hate me so much?

Detectiverse

Middle-aged Fan's Lament
by John D. Morse{© 1971 by John D. Morse.}

Oh, where are the heirs
Of Dorothy L. Sayers?
New 'tecs are flimsy
Compared to Wimsey.

Child's Play
by Alan K. Young{© 1971 by Alan K. Young.}

Professor Amos Ponsonby, Briarwood College's Professor of English emeritus, in a case of "instant detection"…

❖

Professor Ponsonby stared with distaste at the glass of pale liquid in his hand. Admittedly he stood in the library of one of the oldest private-day schools in the state; the Laramie Academy for Young Ladies and Young Gentlemen was older, indeed, than neighboring Briarwood College itself. Admittedly, since the Misses Laramie concerned themselves only with young ladies and gentlemen aged six through twelve, the thousands of books on the shelves around him were intended primarily for young readers. Admittedly, too, the very occasion was a celebration of childhood — the dedication, by the Misses Laramie, of a collection of childhood holographs of the later-to-be-famous, a collection reputed to be one of the finest in the nation.

Ponsonby was quite willing to admit all this. Yet the fact remained that it was well after 9:00 p.m., that the young ladies and gentlemen aged six through twelve were, or should be, safe in their beds, and that it was their parents, godparents, aunts, uncles, and assorted guardians who were expected to survive this mummifying evening with nothing stronger than a few insipid cookies and a children's drink. Pink lemonade! When he got home he'd have Mrs. Garvey fix him a good stiff rum toddy.

"Amos Ponsonby, you dear, *dear* man!" Lydia Laramie, elder of the two maiden sisters who comprised the third generation of their family to run Laramie Academy, had been flitting from knot to knot of parents like an aging lavender butterfly bouncing from blossom to blossom in a springtime garden; now she homed in on Ponsonby as on a favorite rose. "I'm so-o-o glad you could come! Have you had a chance to inspect our collection yet? It's going to quite put Laramie Academy on the literary map, I promise you!"

With difficulty Briarwood College's Professor of English emeritus pulled in his thorns. "No, I haven't, Lydia. But I'm looking forward—"

"And what *did* you think of it? Dear Mr. Hawes assures us it's now quite the finest collection of its kind in the country, perhaps in the

world. He's quite a scholar, you know, and he personally established the authenticity of every single item before he permitted us to buy it. And such an exciting collection, don't you think? I mean the very idea of *childhood* holographs! All those young minds destined to go on to such great and noble things! Why, it's almost like being in at the birth of genius. Or at least its early stages. Which one did you like best?"

"Actually, Lydia, I haven't—"

"My favorite is the Thackeray, I think. The letter to his mother from Fareham telling how his grandmamma had bought him that 'very loveley caliduscope.' Although of course young Winnie Churchill's little note to his 'Dear Mamma' from Ascot is delightful, too. And then of course the Swinburne essay — such an enchanting scrawl! And little Master Joseph Conrad's letter to his Uncle Thaddeus, telling him about his eighth birthday party and about — how does he say it? — 'the great lot of cakes and the great lot of kisses' he'd got from all his aunts. And then there's dear little Elizabeth Barrett writing so solemnly to Mr. Boyd to thank him for the Greek text he'd sent her — at once so solemn and so childish! And of course little Ralphie Emerson's hieroglyphic letter to his brother. But then, they're *all* so wonderful, don't you think?"

"I'm afraid, Lydia, there's something you—"

"Of course they don't look their best in these old glass cases, but as soon as dear Mr. Hawes has been able to arrange the financing for us, we'll have a brand-new library to house them in. I'm so-o-o sorry you won't have a chance to meet him tonight; he had to leave unexpectedly for New York this afternoon — some sort of family matter — but he promised to return next week, and while he's in New York he's going to arrange the loan for our new library.

"We gave him our check for $10,000 — what they call earnest money — so that the bankers will know we're responsible business women and not just two silly old schoolmarms. Although I must say I did have rather a time talking Ernestina into it. Giving dear Mr. Hawes the earnest money, I mean. And all because he uses a long cigarette holder, and ever since That Man was in the White House, Ernestina quite distrusts men who use long cigarette holders. So foolish, when dear Mr. Hawes has promised to match us dollar for dollar in financing our new library. But then Ernestina never was much of a judge—"

"Lydia!" This time, Ponsonby's interruption brooked no denial. "Do you mean to tell me you and Ernestina have actually given Mr. Hawes your personal check for $10,000?"

"Why, yes, Amos. This afternoon, just before he left for New York. It's what they call earnest money—"

"Poppycock! The last thing I want to do is spoil this evening for

you, my dear, but as an old Mend, might I suggest that you call Homer Broadhurst at home right now and tell him to stop payment on that check first thing in the morning? Any New York bank will certainly check with the Briarwood National before cashing a check of that size, and — well, the truth is, Lydia, I'm rather afraid your Mr. Hawes is a fraud."

"A fraud? But what—? How could you—?"

"He apparently told you that he had personally investigated and could vouch for the authenticity of every item in his collection. Yet just a moment ago you mentioned one which is, on the face of it, an impossibility."

"But how can you say that, Amos, when you haven't even looked —?"

"I'm afraid I don't have to look, my dear. You mentioned a letter from young Master Joseph Conrad to his uncle describing his eighth birthday party, and you quoted, a line which made it obvious that the letter was written in English. Yet surprising though it may seem — I myself have always regarded it as one of the miracles of English literature — the man who wrote *Lord Jim* and *Heart of Darkness,* the man who is regarded by many as one of the greatest stylists of the English novel, the man of whom Virginia Woolf said, 'it seemed impossible for him to make an ugly or an insignificant movement of his pen,' the man who described the majesty and mystery of the sea as no other writer before or since, was born Teodor Jozef Konrad Korzeniowski in the village of Berdichev in the Polish Ukraine, and didn't learn to read or speak let alone to write English *until he was more than twenty years old!"*

Inspector Ghote and the Miracle *by H. R. F. Keating*{©1971 by H. R. F. Keating.}

A new Inspector Ghote story by H. R. F. Keating

A new Christmas story in which Inspector Ghote of the Bombay C.I.D. is given a most delicate assignment — an investigation in Tulsi Pipe Road, among the teeming humanity of the hutments and the chawls, of an event that could set in motion the most dangerous civil disturbances — "big trouble… rioting… intercommunity outrages"…

❖

What has Santa Claus got in store for me, Inspector Ghote said to himself, bleakly echoing the current cheerful Bombay newspaper advertisements, as he waited to enter the office of Deputy Superintendent Naik that morning of December 25th.

Whatever the D.S.P. had lined up for him, Ghote knew it was going to be nasty. Ever since he had recently declined to turn up for "voluntary" hockey, D.S.P. Naik had viewed him with sad-eyed disapproval. But what exact form would his displeasure take?

Almost certainly it would have something to do with the big Navy Week parade that afternoon, the chief preoccupation at the moment of most of the ever-excitable and drama-loving Bornbayites. Probably he would be ordered out into the crowds watching the Fire Power demonstration in the bay, ordered to come back with a beltful of pickpocketing arrests.

"Come," the D.S.P.'s voice barked out.

Ghote went in and stood squaring his bony shoulders in front of the papers-strewn desk.

"Ah, Ghote, yes. Tulsi Pipe Road for you. Up at the north end. Going to be big trouble there. Rioting. Intercommunity outrages even."

Ghote's heart sank even deeper than he had expected. Tulsi Pipe Road was a two-kilometers-long thoroughfare that shot straight up from the Racecourse into the heart of a densely crowded mill district where badly paid Hindus, Muslims in hundreds and Goans by the thousand, all lived in prickling closeness, either in great areas of

tumbledown hutments or in high tottering chawls, floor upon floor of massed humanity. Trouble between the religious communities there meant hell, no less.

"Yes, D.S.P.?" he said, striving not to sound appalled.

"We are having a virgin birth business, Inspector."

"Virgin birth, D.S.P. sahib?"

"Come, man, you must have come across such cases."

"I am sorry, D.S.P.," Ghote said, feeling obliged to be true to hard-won scientific principles. "I am unable to believe in virgin birth."

The D.S.P.'s round face suffused with instant wrath.

"Of course I am not asking you to believe in virgin birth, man! It is not you who are to believe: it is all those Christians in the Goan community who are believing it about a baby born two days ago. It is the time of year, of course. These affairs are always coming at Christmas. I have dealt with half a dozen in my day."

"Yes, D.S.P.," Ghote said, contriving to hit on the right note of awe.

"Yes. And there is only one way to deal with it. Get hold of the girl and find out the name of the man. Do that pretty damn quick and the whole affair drops away to nothing, like monsoon water down a drain."

"Yes, D.S.P."

"Well, what are you waiting for, man? Hop it!"

"Name and address of the girl in question, D.S.P. sahib."

The D.S.P.'s face darkened once more. He padded furiously over the jumble of papers on his desk top. And at last he found, the chit he wanted.

"There you are, man. And also you will find there the name of the Head Constable who first reported the matter. See him straightaway. You have got a good man there, active, quick on his feet, sharp. If he could not make that girl talk, you will be having a first-class damn job, Inspector."

Ghote located Head Constable Mudholkar one hour later at the local chowkey where he was stationed. The Head Constable confirmed at once the blossoming dislike for a sharp bully that Ghote had been harboring ever since D.S.P. Naik had praised the fellow. And, what was worse, the chap turned out to be very like the D.S.P. in looks as well. He had the same round type of face, the same puffy-looking lips, even a similar soft blur of mustache. But the Head Constable's appearance was nevertheless a travesty of the D.S.P.'s. His face was, simply, slewed.

To Ghote's prejudiced eyes, at the first moment of their encounter, the man's features seemed grotesquely distorted, as if in some distant time some god had taken one of the Head Constable's

ancestors and had wrenched his whole head sideways between two omnipotent god-hands.

But, as the fellow supplied him with the details of the affair, Ghote forced himself to regard him with an open mind, and he then had to admit that the facial twist which had seemed so pronounced was in fact no more than a drooping corner of the mouth and of one ear being oddly longer than the other.

Ghote had to admit, too, that the chap was efficient. He had all the circumstances of the affair at his fingertips. The girl, named D'Mello, now in a hospital for her own safety, had been rigorously questioned both before and after the birth, but she had steadfastly denied that she had ever been with any man. She was indeed not the sort, the sole daughter of a Goan railway waiter on the Madras Express, a quiet girl, well brought up though her parents were poor enough; she attended Mass regularly with her mother, and the whole family kept themselves to themselves.

"But with those Christians you can never tell," Head Constable Mudholkar concluded.

Ghote felt inwardly inclined to agree. Fervid religion had always made him shrink inwardly, whether it was a Hindu holy man spending 20 years silent and standing upright or whether it was the Catholics, always caressing lifeless statues in their churches till glass protection had to be installed, and even then they still stroked the thick panes. Either manifestation rendered him uneasy.

That was the real reason, he now acknowledged to himself, why he did not want to go and see Miss D'Mello in the hospital where she would be surrounded by nuns amid all the trappings of an alien religion, surrounded with all the panoply of a newly found goddess.

Yet go and see the girl he must.

But first he permitted himself to do every other thing that might possibly be necessary to the case. He visited Mrs. D'Mello, and by dint of patient wheedling, and a little forced toughness, confirmed from her the names of the only two men that Head Constable Mudholkar — who certainly proved to know inside-out the particular chawl where the D'Mellos lived — had suggested as possible fathers. They were both young men — a Goan, Charlie Lobo, and a Sikh, Kuldip Singh.

The Lobo family lived one floor below the D'Mellos. But that one flight of dirt-spattered stairs, bringing them just that much nearer the courtyard tap that served the whole crazily leaning chawl, represented a whole layer higher in social status. And Mrs. Lobo, a huge, tightly fat woman in a brightly flowered Western-style dress, had decided views about the unexpected fame that had come to the people upstairs.

"Has my Charlie been going with that girl?" she repeated after

Ghote had managed to put the question, suitably wrapped up, to the boy. “No, he has not. Charlie, tell the man you hate and despise trash like that.”

“Oh, Mum,” said Charlie, a teen-age wisp of a figure suffocating in a necktie beside his balloon-hard mother.

“Tell the man, Charlie.”

And obediently Charlie muttered something that satisfied his passion-filled parent. Ghote I put a few more questions for form’s sake, but he realized that only by getting hold of the boy on his own was he going to get any worthwhile answers. Yet it turned out that he did not have to employ any cunning. Charlie proved to have a strain of sharp slyness of his own, and hardly had Ghote climbed the stairs to the floor above the D’Mellos where Kuldip Singh lived when he heard a whispered call from the shadow-filled darkness below.

“Mum’s got her head over the stove,” Charlie said. “She don’t know I slipped out.”

“There is something you have to tell me?” Ghote said, acting the indulgent uncle. “You are in trouble — that’s it, isn’t it?”

“My only trouble is Mum,” the boy replied. “Listen, mister, I had to tell you. I love Miss D’Mello — yes, I love her. She’s the most wonderful girl ever was.”

“And you want to marry her, and because you went too far before —”

“No, no, no. She’s far and away too good for me. Mister, I’ve never even said ‘Good morning’ to her in the two years we’ve lived here. But I love her, mister, and I’m not going to have Mum make me say different.”

Watching him slip cunningly back home, Ghote made his mental notes and then turned to tackle Kuldip Singh, his last comparatively easy task before the looming interview at the nun-ridden hospital he knew he must have.

Kuldip Singh, as Ghote had heard from Head Constable Mudholkar, was different from his neighbors. He lived in this teeming area from choice not necessity. Officially a student, he spent all his time in a series of antisocial activities — protesting, writing manifestoes, drinking. He seemed an ideal candidate for the unknown and elusive father.

Ghote’s suspicions were at once heightened when the young Sikh opened his door. The boy, though old enough to have a beard, lacked this status symbol. Equally he had discarded the obligatory turban of his religion. But all the Sikh bounce was there, as Ghote discovered when he identified himself.

“Policewallah, is it? Then I want nothing at all to do with you. Me and the police are enemies, bhai. Natural enemies.”

“Irrespective of such considerations,” Ghote said stiffly, “it is my duty to put to you certain questions concerning one Miss D’Mello.”

The young Sikh burst into a roar of laughter.

“The miracle girl, is it?” he said. “Plenty of trouble for policemen there, I promise you.

Top-level rioting coming from that business. The fellow who fathered that baby did us a lot of good.”

Ghote plugged away a good while longer — the hospital nuns awaited — but for all his efforts he learned no more than he had in that first brief exchange. And in the end he still had to go and meet his doom.

Just what he had expected at the hospital he never quite formulated to himself. What he did find was certainly almost the exact opposite of his fears. A calm reigned. White-habited nuns, mostly Indian but with a few Europeans, flitted silently to and fro or talked quietly to the patients whom Ghote glimpsed lying on beds in long wards. Above them swung frail but bright paper chains in honor of the feast day, and these were all the excitement there was.

The small separate ward in which Miss D’Mello lay in a broad bed all alone was no different. Except that the girl was isolated, she seemed to be treated in just the same way as the other new mothers in the big maternity ward that Ghote had been led through on his way in. In the face of such matter-of-factness he felt hollowly cheated.

Suddenly, too, to his own utter surprise he found, looking down at the big calm-after-storm eyes of the Goan girl, that he wanted the story she was about to tell him to be true. Part of him knew that, if it were so, or if it was widely believed to be so, appalling disorders could result from the feverish religious excitement that was bound to mount day by day. But another part of him now simply wanted a miracle to have happened.

He began, quietly and almost diffidently, to put his questions. Miss D’Mello would hardly answer at all, but such syllables as she did whisper were of blank inability to name anyone as the father of her child. After a while Ghote brought himself, with a distinct effort of will, to change his tactics. He banged out the hard line. Miss D’Mello went quietly and totally mute.

Then Ghote slipped in, with adroit suddenness, the name of Charlie Lobo. He got only a small puzzled frown.

Then, in an effort to make sure that her silence was not a silence of fear, he presented, with equal suddenness, the name of Kuldip Singh. If the care-for-nothing young Sikh had forced this timid creature, this might be the way to get an admission. But instead there came something approaching a laugh.

“That Kuldip is a funny fellow,” the girl said, with an out-of-place

and unexpected offhandedness.

Ghote almost gave up. But at that moment a nun nurse appeared carrying in her arms a small, long, white-wrapped, minutely crying bundle — the baby.

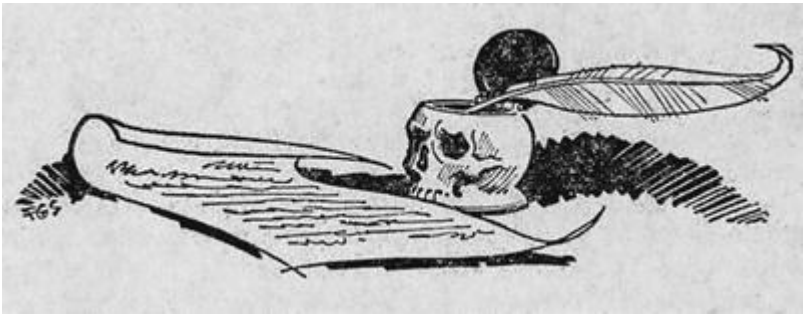
While she handed the hungry scrap to its mother Ghote stood and watched. Perhaps holding the child she would—?

He looked down at the scene on the broad bed, awaiting his moment again. The girl fiercely held the tiny agitated thing to her breast and in a moment or two quiet came, the tiny head applied to the life-giving nipple. How human the child looked already, Ghote thought. How much a man at two days old. The round skull, almost bald, as it might become again toward the end of its span. The frown on the forehead that would last a lifetime, the tiny, perfectly formed, plainly asymmetrical ears—

And then Ghote knew that there had not been any miracle. It was as he had surmised, but with different circumstances. Miss D'Mello was indeed too frightened to talk. No wonder, when the local bully, Head Constable Mudholkar with his slewed head and its one ear so characteristically longer than the other, was the man who had forced himself on her.

A deep smothering of disappointment floated down on Ghote. So it had been nothing miraculous after all. Just a sad case, to be cleared up painfully. He stared down at the bed.

The tiny boy suckled energetically. And with a topsy-turvy welling up of rose-pink pleasure, Ghote saw that there had after all been a miracle. The daily, hourly, every-minute miracle of a new life, of a new flicker of hope in the tired world.



Grandfather and the Little Bone
by Lloyd Biggle, Jr.{© 1971 by Lloyd Biggle, Jr.}

A new Grandfather Rastin story by Lloyd Biggle. Jr.

The time has come — indeed, it's long overdue — to begin a Detective Dossier on Lloyd Biggie, Jr.'s Grandfather William Rastin…

The octogenarian sleuth, though past his biblical span, still has the build of a blacksmith, which he was until the horseless carriage took over; a stubborn coot, he has never changed his opinion of a contraption he considers noisier, smellier, and less dependable than a horse.

Grandfather Rastin is a lifelong resident and senior citizen of Borgville, Michigan, and its most prominent landmark. His other opinions in this "age of anxiety" are also worth your attention: for example, he does not think it's a coincidence that the rocking chair and 20th Century civilization declined simultaneously. (For other opinions, especially of human nature, see stories.) And he regards himself as more of a bucolic philosopher than a detective. He once opined: "A bad apple may spoil the barrel, but it can make a much more interesting cider."

Grandfather's "Watson" is his grandson, Johnny Rastin, a precociously mature high-school student who also functions as the old gentleman's chauffeur, errand boy, Number One assistant, and partner-in-plots against Grandfather's pet peeve, Sheriff Pilkins. Grandfather and grandson don't always see eye to eye — but they do agree that while the local townspeople are not the most interesting human beings in the world, they are the most interesting in Borg County, Michigan…

Mr. Osborne, our high-school principal, claims that feeding time at the zoo is a quiet and peaceful occasion compared with lunchtime in the Borgville High cafeteria. He says he could shoot a cannon off and it wouldn't even be noticed if no one smelled the smoke. He may be right, because once when Mrs. Patousel slipped behind the counter and broke her leg no one heard her yelling for help until half the students had left for class.

It only goes to show that discovering a murder isn't anything like getting a leg broken. Everyone in the cafeteria heard Sue Byers

scream.

What happened was that Dianne Storrow was excavating in her purse for a letter she wanted to pass around, and something came to the top that she'd forgot she had. She said, "Oh, that old bone," and tossed it onto the table. No one paid any attention.

Two minutes later Sue Byers, who was sitting across the table, looked up and saw the bone.

You should know this about Sue Byers. She lives with her uncle, who is Borgville's only doctor, and her ambition is to be a doctor herself. She spends all her spare time studying her uncle's medical books, and she already knows so much about anatomy that the boys are afraid to go out with her.

She took one good look at that bone and screamed, and one second later the cafeteria was so quiet that Fatty Fasuli later claimed he was able to hear the ice cream melting on his pie a la mode.

Sue stood up and motioned to Mr. Sadler, the biology teacher. He came and looked at the bone, then he looked at Sue, and finally he said, "I think so."

"I *know* so," Sue said.

"Where did it come from?" Mr. Sadler asked.

"That old bone?" Dianne said. "I've had it in my purse since last summer. You see, I had this job—" Then she understood, and *she* screamed.

A lot of lunches didn't get finished that day. Mr. Sadler picked up the bone and whisked both girls off to Mr. Osborne's office, and everyone else left off eating and tried to figure out what had happened. It wasn't until after school that we finally found out: since the middle of the summer Dianne had been carrying a human finger bone around in her purse.

My Grandfather Rastin already knew about it when I got home. Doc Byers had told him. Doc was plenty irked at Sheriff Pilkins, because the Sheriff thought a doctor should be able to take one look at that little hunk of bone and tell him the initials of the person whose body it had come from. All Doc was willing to say was that it was human and had probably belonged to an adult with small fingers.

"Male or female?" the Sheriff wanted to know.

"Adult," Doc said.

"Small stature, you say?"

"Small *fingers,*" Doc said.

"Well, if the fingers were small, then the hands must have been small, and if the hands were small—"

"I've seen smaller fingers than that on hands that were bigger than yours," Doc said.

"Women have small fingers. Could it have been a woman?"

“There’s no way I know of to determine sex from one finger bone,” Doc said. And walked out, slamming the door.

Grandfather said meditatively, “Women’s purses being what they are, I suppose something like this was bound to happen sooner or later.”

“Dianne’s purse isn’t exactly a purse,” I told him. “It’s more like an oversized feedbag with drawstrings. It wouldn’t surprise me if she had a skull or two rattling around at the bottom.”

“It would surprise me,” Grandfather said. “The word I got was that she gave the whole shebang to the custodian to burn, even including what v/as left of this week’s allowance.”

“Has anyone admitted losing a finger bone?” I asked.

Grandfather didn’t answer.

“For that matter, where did Dianne get it?” I asked.

Grandfather sighed. “I guess we’d better go over to Wiston.”

I got out my jalopy.

Along the way he told me what had happened. “Fellow named Daille,” he said. “Jim Daille. I knew his grandfather. He has some kind of construction job, and from early spring until late fall he travels around the state working on highways and bridges. He’s a widower, and he hires a housekeeper to look after his daughter Betsy, who is three.

“Last summer his housekeeper had to quit suddenly and she persuaded Dianne Storrow to take the job until Daille could find a replacement. Dianne’s parents weren’t enthusiastic about the situation, but the pay was good and Daille wasn’t at home — he didn’t come home all the time she was there — and after a couple of weeks he sent a woman down from the upper peninsula to take over.”

“How does the bone come into it?” I asked.

“The child had it. Every night Betsy picked out a bedtime story she wanted to hear, and one night it was the one about the wee little woman who found a wee little bone. Remember it? She put the bone in her wee little cupboard, then she crept into her wee little bed and blew out her wee little candle, and suddenly, in the dark, she heard a wee little voice say, *‘Give me my bone!’* ”

“I remember,” I said.

“And the voice kept asking until the wee little woman sat up in bed and said, *‘TAKE IT!’* The story almost frightened Betsy into a fit. She jumped out of bed and got the bone from her toy box and gave it to Dianne, and then she hid under the covers and cried herself to sleep. Dianne put the bone in her purse, meaning to dispose of it when the child wasn’t around, and of course she forgot about it.”

“Then the main question is where the kid got it.”

"Right. And if Sheriff Pilkins doesn't handle it just right, Betsy will be too scared to tell him anything." He thought for a moment and added, "As long as I've known Pilkins he's never handled anything right."

We turned onto Shady Lane, which was a little dirt street leading off Highway 29 a couple of miles north of Wiston. There was plenty of shade but only four houses, set far apart on the north side of the street, and just beyond the fourth house the street dead-ended up against an eight-foot, woven-wire fence topped with four strands of barbed wire and plastered with *NO TRESPASSING* signs. That is, it was supposed to dead-end there, but some idiot had mistaken Shady Lane for the Indianapolis Speedway and crashed through the fence and into the pines.

We drove the length of the street, pursued by two barking mongrels, and we found five Sheriff and State Police cars parked near the last house. I managed to pull in between two of them without picking up any fresh scratches.

Grandfather was looking at the hole in the fence. "That's very interesting."

"What's in there?" I asked.

"The old Forsythe estate."

"You've got to be kidding!"

He didn't answer. He thinks slang is vulgar if anyone else uses it.

Sheriff Pilkins came to meet us with two dogs frisking at his heels. He said, "You heard what happened?"

Grandfather nodded.

"Daille's wife disappeared over a year ago. At first Daille said she was visiting relatives, and then he said she took sick suddenly and died."

"That shouldn't be hard to prove one way or the other," Grandfather observed.

"Yeah, once we get our hands on Daille. No one knows where he's working, not even his housekeeper. Or so she says. If she tips him off that we're looking for him we may have a long look."

Grandfather jerked a thumb at the hole in the fence. "Looking in there?"

"Later, maybe. That happened last spring, which was a long time after Daille's wife disappeared. With all the wide-open spaces available around here I can't see him climbing a fence to dispose of a body."

"There are worse places to hide a body than a thick pine forest surrounded by a fence and No Trespassing signs."

The Sheriff shrugged. "For that matter, one of these dratted dogs

could have brought the bone from miles away and buried it in the kid's sand box. But this is where it turned up, and this is where there's a person missing, and that's reason enough to start looking here."

The Sheriff walked away, but the two dogs stayed and started frisking around Grandfather. I asked him if any of Old Man Forsythe's wives were missing, and he said there wasn't any point in an outsider trying to keep track of them when Forsythe had never been able to.

For years the kids had been calling the house on the Forsythe estate Bluebeard's Castle, but I never could figure out why. It was just a big old house, and Old Man Forsythe's beard wasn't blue at all but a kind of dirty red that turned white as he got older; besides, he didn't have nearly as many wives as Bluebeard did. He'd been dead for a long time, but the surviving wives were still fighting over his estate, which was probably why the hole in the fence hadn't been fixed.

"Isn't Forsythe buried in there somewhere?" I asked.

Grandfather stared at me. "I forgot about that. He had his own private cemetery. That's why the wives are contesting his will. He's buried in the central plot, surrounded by graves of his favorite dogs, and the wives don't inherit anything unless they agree to be buried with the dogs."

He chased after the Sheriff and said something to him, and the Sheriff raised both hands forlornly and headed for his patrol car.

"Is he going to check the grave?" I asked.

Grandfather nodded. "Forsythe had small hands."

We walked around a bit, dodging the dogs. In the distance some deputies and State Troopers were moving in a line between the Forsythe fence and Highway 29. Otherwise, except for the shade trees along the street and the muddy ruts by the houses where the people parked their cars, all we saw as far as the eye could see was weeds.

As far as *my* eye could see. Grandfather is past 80, but he sees a lot more than I do. He says my trouble is that I don't know the difference between looking and seeing. We circled behind the houses and walked to the highway and back again, and along the way Grandfather picked up one of those little shovels that kids play with in the sand, and a doll's leg, and a marigold blooming so deep in the weeds that I was surprised it bothered, and a ham bone the dogs had been gnawing on.

Grandfather pocketed the shovel and the doll's leg. The marigold he sniffed, making a face, and then he threw it away. The ham bone he scowled at and gave to one of the dogs, which ran off closely pursued by the other. After he showed me where to look I helped him out by finding a petunia and two moss roses near where he'd found the marigold. These were the only signs of cultivation in sight and might have been helpful if we'd been looking for a sloppy

horticulturist instead of a murderer.

We went back to the Daille house, and Grandfather knocked on the door. Daille's housekeeper was a girl who couldn't have been long out of high school. She wasn't dressed for company, her hair was a mess, and behind smudged glasses her eyes were very, very scared.

"I'm an old friend of Jim's family," Grandfather said. "I thought perhaps I could help."

"Oh," she said. "Won't you come in?"

She already had a roomful of company, but that was only because the living room was small and one of the three women present was large enough to make a gymnasium look crowded. As we walked in they looked us over as though we were some kind of rare insect showing up out of season. Something crashed in the next room, and the housekeeper excused herself over her shoulder as she dashed out.

"I'm Bill Rastin," Grandfather said. "This is my grandson, Johnny."

"We're Betsy's neighbors," the fat woman said. "I'm Tru Wyler, and this is Ruth Loken and Joyce Dockett."

Grandfather wanted to know who lived where, and the Wyler woman, with the tone of her voice making it very clear that it was none of his business, explained that Ruth Loken lived next door, and Joyce Dockett lived nearest the highway, and she lived between them. The other two could have done a Mutt-and-Jeff act. Even when sitting down the Dockett woman looked tall enough to play for the Boston Celtics, and Ruth Loken was tiny. Both of them looked positively undernourished beside Tru Wyler.

The Wyler woman's head fascinated me, it was so perfectly balanced: several layers of platinum blonde hair piled up on top and several layers of chin piled up underneath. She caught me staring at her and she stared right back, and there's no telling where that might have ended if Daille's daughter hadn't started crying in the next room.

"Men!" Tru Wyler said, turning toward the doorway. "That poor kid came down here to look after Betsy because she thinks Daille's going to marry her. A pretty sneaky way of getting a housekeeper to work for nothing, I'd say."

Then Betsy ran into the room. She was a cute little kid with blonde hair tied in pigtails and she went straight to Tru Wyler, who gathered her up and cooed, "Hello, honey baby." Betsy cooed back and gave Wyler a smacking kiss. The fat woman began making faces at her, and since she had so much material to work with she was able to put on quite a show. Betsy laughed herself into a spasm of coughing, and Tru Wyler got that stopped and began whispering baby talk. Grandfather, who thinks children are people, gave her a look of absolute disgust. Fortunately she didn't notice.

Sheriff Pilkins came stomping up the steps. I opened the door for him, and he looked in, glared at Tru Wyler — who glared right back at him — and jerked his thumb at Grandfather. Grandfather excused the two of us, and we went outside.

"Forsythe's grave hasn't been touched," the Sheriff said.

"Since when?" Grandfather wanted to know.

"Since it was sodded, right after he was buried. There's a full-time caretaker."

"I didn't say it was a *good* idea." Grandfather gestured at the horizon, beyond which the police search had disappeared. "If Daille wouldn't climb a fence with a body, what makes you think he'd tote it way over there?"

"I don't. I've called them back." He pointed at the fence. "We'll have a look in there."

"What are you looking for?"

"The body that bone came from," the Sheriff snapped. He stomped away, and Grandfather and I went back into the house.

Tru Wyler was still cooing over Betsy. The housekeeper was sitting across the room. Grandfather took the only other chair, and I stood by the door.

"Is this the book?" Grandfather asked, picking one up from an end table.

The housekeeper nodded. "The Sheriff was looking at it." It was a typical Mother Goose book for children, with stories and nursery rhymes, and most of the colored pictures had been touched up, but not improved, with crayon scribbles. Grandfather turned the pages slowly. Betsy and Tru Wyler continued to coo, and Loken and Dockett watched them and tried not to look jealous. The housekeeper looked as if she'd rather the whole parcel of us cleared out.

A car drove up outside and a moment later a young man came charging up the front steps. He took one step into the room, pointed at Tru Wyler, and shouted, "Out!"

Her face turned a sort of mottled crimson, which did not go at all well with her platinum hair. She wrapped her arms protectively around Betsy and said, "Wife killer!"

He stepped across the room. They faced each other, Wyler in the chair and the man standing over her, and both of them breathing hard and openly hating. He'd come directly from work, probably driving a long way, and his shirt was crusted with salt where perspiration had dried and his curly hair was a tangle and he looked deadly. She looked hot and flustered even though she had on a light summer dress and didn't have one platinum hair out of place.

Suddenly he snatched at Betsy. The kid started to howl, and Tru Wyler held on, and for a moment I thought they were going to play

tug of war with her. Then Daille drew his fist back, and Tru Wyler seemed to know that any notions he might have about chivalry wouldn't apply to her. She let go, and he handed Betsy, still howling, to his housekeeper and chased her out of the room with a glance.

He pointed at the door, which the two younger women were already using.

It was something to see Tru Wyler struggle out of that chair. Her chins moved one at a time, she pushed with both hands, and it wouldn't have surprised me if she popped out of the chair like a cork coming out of a bottle. Finally she got to her feet and started to move. I expected her to shake the house when she walked, but she took delicate little steps and managed to look about as dignified as one can when being ordered out of a house.

At the door she turned. "Wife killer!" she said again. "The poor baby — her own mother's finger—"

He took a step toward her and she went through the door sideways and disappeared.

Daille turned to us, still pointing at the door. Grandfather said, "Are you Jim Daille? I'm Bill Rastin, a friend of your grandfather's. This is my grandson, Johnny."

"Oh," Daille said. He closed the door and slumped back against it with his hands over his face. "The witches!" he muttered. "The damn witches!" His whole body was trembling with rage. Suddenly he straightened up and looked at Grandfather. "What's going on here?"

Grandfather told him, speaking very slowly and keeping his eyes on Daille's face.

"Bone?" Daille said. "A human bone?"

Grandfather nodded.

"So that's what the old witch meant!"

"You didn't know anything about this?"

He shook his head. "Shirley telephoned my landlady that there was big trouble here and I was needed, and I started as soon as I got the message. This filthy neighborhood! I should have left it years ago, but I've had so darned many bills, and what with my work being seasonal—"

In the next room Betsy started to howl again. Daille said bitterly, "It wasn't enough that they poisoned my wife's mind. Now they're working on my daughter and I suppose on Shirley, too. The damn witches! I've put up with this long enough. Shirley!"

The housekeeper stuck her head around the comer, looking scared to death. "Start packing," Daille said. "We're getting out of here right now. Permanently."

"This might not be the best time for you to leave," Grandfather observed.

"The best time would have been a long time ago. But I hated to farm Betsy out like an orphan. I wanted her brought up in her own home, and besides, with all the bills I've had I just couldn't manage another place."

"What sort of trouble have you been having with your neighbors?"

Daille snorted. "Those foul-minded witches! Couldn't keep men of their own to bedevil — all three of them are divorced — so they take their spite out on any man they can get their claws into. If you'll excuse me — I want to pack some clothes. Then I'm going to walk away and leave this house and everything in it to rot."

He went to the bedroom, and Grandfather sat down in a chair and crossed his legs and screwed up his face. He was thinking so hard that he didn't even look up when the Sheriff came to the door.

"Daille here?" the Sheriff asked.

I nodded.

The Sheriff hesitated, did some thinking of his own, then went out and came back with four deputies. As it turned out this was one situation he handled correctly. It started out real friendly-like, the Sheriff saying, "Where's your wife, son?" and Daille answering politely, "None of your business," and the Sheriff saying, just as politely, "I think it is and I have a warrant for your arrest."

By the time it ended, the Sheriff needed all four of his deputies, and it was just as well that Daille wasn't planning on taking the house furnishings with him because two chairs, the coffee table, a floor lamp, and the television set weren't in condition to furnish anything but a junk yard.

Grandfather and I ducked outside when it started and waited until they persuaded Daille to come quietly. The Sheriff had one eye that was going to get worse before it got better, and Daille's shirt was ripped, but otherwise the furniture took most of the punishment.

We helped the housekeeper clean up the mess. She was being brave about it and trying not to cry. Grandfather sat down in the kitchen to talk with her, and I spent the next half hour babysitting. I read aloud from the Mother Goose book, and Betsy pulled herself onto the sofa and sat watching me very seriously. I gave her the latest scoop on the three little pigs and Goldilocks and the three bears, and then — intentionally skipping the history of Tom Thumb — I acted out Jack and the Beanstalk in a new and improved version of my own.

When Grandfather was finished we went outside. Steve Carling, one of Sheriff Pilkins' deputies, was standing by the hole in the fence and looking forlorn. "Those dratted trees are *thick,"* he complained. "You need a machete to hack your way through."

"Cheer up," Grandfather said. "Maybe Daille will confess."

"Not him. He isn't stupid. He'll know we haven't got much of a case with only one finger bone."

State Police Sergeant Reichel drove up and wanted to know where his men were, and when Steve pointed to the woods the sergeant shook his head and commenced wondering if he should start sending out search parties.

"This fellow Daille seems to be a very unusual sort of murderer," he said.

"Have you bought it?" Grandfather asked.

"I think so. Haven't you?"

"I came over here ready to buy it, but since I got here I've turned up something that has me wondering."

"What's that?"

"Nothing that says he didn't do it. Just something that makes me wonder if he did. Pilkins should have done some checking before he arrested him."

The sergeant had a big bag of hamburgers, which he invited us to share. The two dogs showed up as soon as we started eating and hung around till the Dockett woman called them down to her house and put out a pan of food. Sergeant Reichel told us that Daille had spoken only four words after his arrest, "I want a lawyer," but that Sheriff Pilkins seemed pretty confident he had the right man and would find a body to go with the finger bone.

By that time it was getting dark. Sheriff Pilkins drove up and hallooed everyone out of the woods, but they were coming out anyway. They stood around eating Sergeant Reichel's hamburgers and arguing.

The Sheriff said disgustedly, "Those dratted women can't even agree on when they last saw Daille's wife. Mrs. Wyler is positive he took her and the kid on a trip and came back without her."

"That's interesting," Grandfather said. "He brought back just a finger bone?"

The Sheriff shrugged. "Wyler lives two houses away and anyway she's gone half the time visiting her sister. Ruth Loken lives next door and should know, but she has a cottage on Mud Lake and spends half her time there in warm weather. Anyway, she's positive that she saw Mrs. Daille a number of times after that trip. Mrs. Dockett is still trying to remember. The only proposition that gets no arguments is that Daille is a heel. All three of them hate his guts."

"Why?" Grandfather wanted to know.

"At a guess, because he hired housekeepers instead of letting one of them look after Betsy."

The Sheriff announced that he was going to have another try at getting the kid to talk. Grandfather walked off with Sergeant Reichel

and Steve Carling. I went with the Sheriff, because he'd heard about my reading stories to Betsy and wanted to find out if I could coax anything out of her.

The moment she saw him she started to howl. I quieted that by standing on my head, which made her giggle, but every time I stopped she began howling again, and I am not good at asking questions while standing on my head. All the Sheriff did was sit in the corner and scratch at his bald spot, and when we finally gave up, his head must have been as sore as mine.

Then the three witches — excuse me, Mrs. Wyler, Mrs. Loken and Mrs. Dockett — came in from the rear of the house, and about the same time Grandfather entered from the front. I gave the Sheriff my resignation, telling him that a performance before such a large audience would jeopardize my amateur standing.

Betsy was already cooing at Mrs. Wyler, and that gave the Sheriff the bright idea that Mrs. Wyler should ask the questions.

"Nothing doing," she announced flatly.

"Look," Sheriff Pilkins said. "You used up an hour of my time this afternoon telling me what a rat Daille is. Don't you want him convicted?"

"You bet your fat head I do!"

"This is all I need to wrap up the case."

She was torn. She thought the little innocent shouldn't be tricked into giving evidence that would convict her own father, but at the same time she had a happy vision of Daille behind bars, and obviously she wanted to help put him there.

"All right," she said finally. She cooed at Betsy, "Look, honey babe. Remember the little bone?"

Betsy cooed right back at her, "Noooooooo." And that was how it went.

Grandfather listened disgustedly for a few minutes, then he picked up Betsy's story book. During the next lull in the cooing he announced, *"Old Mrs. McShuttle lived in a coal-scuttle, along with her dog and cat."*

The Sheriff and the women glared at him. Betsy giggled.

Grandfather went on, "*What they ate I can't tell, but 'tis known very well, that none of the party were fat.*"

"The bone, honey babe," Mrs. Wyler said icily.

"Noooooooooo," Betsy said.

"Old Mother Hubbard went to the cupboard, to get her poor dog—"

"Shut up!" the Sheriff snapped.

"The little bone you were playing with, honey baby. You *must* remember where you found it."

"Noooooooooooo."

"They all ran after the farmer's wife, who cut off their tails with a carving knife."

"For God's sake!" the Sheriff exclaimed.

"She whipped them all soundly and put them to bed… Doesn't it frighten you to find the children of America being brought up on such unvarnished tales of violence?"

"The little bone, Betsy—"

"Nooooooooooo."

'Be he live or be he dead, I'll grind his bones to make my bread."

The three women blanched, and when Tru Wyler tried again to say, "The little bone—" she choked on it.

"And crime," Grandfather went on, seeming not to notice. "The Knave of Hearts, he stole the tarts, Tom, Tom, the piper's son, stole a pig and away he run." He paused. "I don't think so much of the grammar, either."

The housekeeper, whose eyes were now very red behind her glasses, came in to announce that it was Betsy's bedtime. No one paid any attention.

"The little bone," Mrs. Wyler cooed. "Where did you get the little bone, honey babe?"

"Nooooooooooo."

"Mistress Mary, quite contrary, how does your garden grow? With silver bells and cockle shells, and little bones all in a row."

That produced a commotion all around the room, but I didn't pay any attention to it because I was watching Betsy. She giggled. "Little bones."

"Little bones," Grandfather said. "*Little bones among the flowers, you sit and play with them for hours.*"

Mrs. Wyler's chins were making like an accordion. Mrs. Loken had opened her mouth and forgotten to close it. Mrs. Dockett was leaning forward, and I noticed for the first time that she wore a hearing aid. Everyone seemed absolutely fascinated except Betsy, who climbed onto Mrs. Wyler's lap, held up both hands pattycake style, and said, "Play."

Mrs. Dockett, who was sitting by the window, suddenly exclaimed, "There's a light out there behind your house, Ruth."

Mrs. Loken looked out. "Something funny's going on out there."

The Sheriff started for the door, and everyone chased after him except the housekeeper and Mrs. Wyler. When I left the room Mrs. Wyler was again struggling to get out of her chair, but the only things moving were her chins.

She was the last one to find out that the light was behind *her* house. Steve Carling and another deputy were digging a hole while a State Trooper held a flashlight for them.

"What's going on here?" the Sheriff roared.

Steve leaned on his shovel. "It's Rastin's idea. Sergeant Reichel is on his way with a search warrant, but in the meantime you were keeping the old dame occupied, and we thought—"

"Who are you working for? Me, or Rastin, or Reichel? What have you found?"

"Nothing, yet."

"Nothing, yet! Of all the idiotic, lamebrained, imbecilic things to do! Walk onto private property in the middle of the night and start digging a hole. I ought to dump you into it and fill it over you. If you're that hard up for exercise—"

He stopped, because Tru Wyler came up behind him very quietly and stuck a shotgun into his back. "Get out," she purred. "All of you — get out."

Steve turned quickly and fell into the hole. It was only six inches deep, so he climbed out fast and headed for the property line. Grandfather stood his ground. The rest of us backed off, all except the Sheriff, who had been caught facing the wrong way. He marched straight ahead.

Mrs. Wyler made one small miscalculation. She had the shotgun, but the State Trooper held the flashlight. He suddenly thought to turn it off, and when he turned it on again Grandfather had the gun. He handed it to the Sheriff, who checked it and announced that it wasn't loaded.

"They're digging," Grandfather told Mrs. Wyler, "because this is where Daille buried his wife."

"Here? In *my* yard?"

Grandfather nodded.

"I don't believe it." She thought for a moment. "Go ahead and dig, but I don't believe it."

She went back to her house, taking those mincing little steps, and then she spoiled the effect by slamming the door. Just then Sergeant Reichel arrived with his search warrant and seemed pleased to learn that it wasn't needed. I meant to ask him how far down a search warrant covers but I forgot.

The deputies started to dig again, with Grandfather standing by to examine every shovelful. Things went easily enough for the first couple of feet and then got progressively harder until they struck clay that obviously hadn't been disturbed for years. The Sheriff said to Grandfather, "Well?"

"It was just an idea," Grandfather said ruefully.

"Sure. You didn't say it was a *good* idea. Why'd you have them digging here? You been using a divining rod, or something?"

"Something like that," Grandfather said.

"The next time you have an idea—"

A cool voice said sarcastically, "If you've finished playing, you can fill in the hole."

The three women were standing there in the dark, watching.

"Fill it in," the Sheriff said disgustedly.

"Fill it in neatly," Tru Wyler said.

She stood by giving orders and enjoying every minute of it, with the other women giggling and offering suggestions of their own, and they raised such a fuss about leaving the yard the way it was that the Sheriff promised to send someone out in the morning to replant the weeds.

Sergeant Reichel had gone over to use the radio on his police car, and he came back and said to Grandfather, "They found it."

"Congratulations," Grandfather said. "I can't remember a more efficient investigation."

"Congratulations to you. It was right where you said it would be."

"Yes. Well — people tend to repeat themselves."

"I don't want to sound inquisitive," Sheriff Pilkins growled, "but if it's this murder case of mine that you two are talking about *I'd* like to know what's going on."

"Where can we talk?" Grandfather asked. "Mrs. Wyler's house?"

"Certainly not!" she snapped.

"Thought maybe you'd want to know why we were digging up your yard," Grandfather said. "We've bothered Daille's housekeeper plenty for one day, but I suppose we can go back there."

Mrs. Wyler decided that maybe we could use her house, but she wouldn't let us in until she'd spread newspapers all over her living-room floor. There weren't enough chairs for everyone, so I stood in the corner behind Grandfather. Mrs. Wyler had her own oversized chair on the other side of the room, Ruth Loken and Joyce Dockett sat on the sofa, and the deputies and State Troopers played Alphonse and Gaston with the chairs that were left.

"The first question," Grandfather said, keeping his eyes on Tru Wyler, "was where the bone came from. The only place for some distance around here where any dirt has *ever* been turned over is the flowerbed in your back yard."

"I didn't see any flowerbed," the Sheriff objected.

"I had bad luck with it this year," Mrs. Wyler said. "Nothing came up but weeds."

"I saw it because I was looking for it," Grandfather told the Sheriff. "Once I'd found it, there wasn't much of a problem in figuring out what had happened. Look at it from Daille's point of view. He had a body to dispose of, and in Mrs. Wyler's yard there was a flowerbed maybe just spaded for the season and the right size for burying a

body. What could be simpler than to go out on a night when no one was home, bury the body in the flowerbed, carry away any surplus dirt, and leave the bed all ready for planting?"

Mrs. Wyler said, "You mean all this time — in *my* flowerbed—"

Grandfather nodded. "For almost a year. But this spring Mrs. Dockett adopted a couple of stray dogs, and Daille looked out one day and saw the dogs digging in the flowerbed. Of course that wouldn't do, so he picked another time when his neighbors were away, dug up the body, and hid it somewhere else. His timing was a little off, though. The flowers had already been planted. After he turned the dirt over they didn't do well."

Sheriff Pilkins leaned forward. "The bone?"

"Working at night he easily could have overlooked one little bone. Or maybe the dogs did dig up something. Anyway, Betsy found it."

"So that's what you were getting at with that Mother Goose stuff about bones in flowerbeds!"

Grandfather grinned. "Not exactly, but that's why we dug up your yard, Mrs. Wyler. I figured that the body wouldn't be there, but we had to check, and there was always the chance that more than one bone had been overlooked."

She nodded, working the accordion under her chin. "I see. He dug up the body—" She paused. "My flowers were planted toward the end of April, so if he dug there shortly *after* that — for a moment you had me fooled, Mr. Rastin. I thought you were an exceptional man, meaning that you might possibly possess normal intelligence. I was wrong. This year Daille *was gone all spring.* If the dogs were digging in my flowerbed he wouldn't have seen them, and he couldn't have done any digging there himself."

"He could have returned at night. With you and Mrs. Loken gone —"

"No." She shook her head. "It's no use, Mr. Rastin. You can't think that body into my flowerbed. It was early summer last year when Mrs. Daille disappeared, and my flowers had a nice start by then. He couldn't have buried her there without ruining them, and last year the flowers were beautiful."

The Sheriff said drily, "I can't see Daille burying his wife so shallow that a dog could disturb the body."

"Frankly, neither can I," Grandfather agreed unexpectedly. "And if he wouldn't do it that way, and if the flowerbed wasn't disturbed when she disappeared, and if he wasn't home this spring to dig her up, that brings us to the next question: Whose body was it? Because there *was* a body in your flowerbed, Mrs. Wyler. That was where the bone came from. Unfortunately, Sheriff Pilkins has a talent for jumping at

conclusions. Daille's daughter had the bone, Daille's wife was missing, so he jumped. The fact is, on this short street there are *four* missing persons."

"Four?" the Sheriff exclaimed.

"One wife," Grandfather said, "and three husbands. Do you have anything to say about that, Mrs. Wyler?"

"Only that you get more ridiculous every time you open your mouth. All our husbands—"

"Divorced you? Ever since I heard about that I've been wondering if perhaps one of them didn't act soon enough. But first, tell me how it is that you happen to have a flowerbed, Mrs. Wyler. I don't mean to be discourteous, I'm just looking at the situation objectively. You don't impress me as the gardening type. Did you plant the flowers yourself?"

"Well—"

"And spade the ground? And weed it? A flowerbed entirely surrounded by weeds would require a lot of weeding."

Mrs. Wyler sat very still. She was looking a little the way the Egyptian Sphinx would look if it had a lot of chins. Then, very slowly, she turned to Mrs. Loken. "Ruth — Ruth always spaded it. Spaded it and planted it and weeded it. She said she was glad to do it for me. The whole thing was her idea. I was away, and when I came home she said, 'You always talked about having a few flowers. Well, I've made a flowerbed for you.' That must have been ten years ago."

"Eleven," Grandfather said. "Enough time to account for the fact that there wasn't any tissue left on the bone. And this year she stopped weeding it?"

Mrs. Wyler did her accordion nod.

"And the first year she planted it was the year her husband 'divorced' her?"

Mrs. Wyler hesitated. "I think — yes—"

"We had four missing persons on this street," Grandfather said. "Thanks to some remarkably quick and efficient investigating by Sergeant Reichel, three of them are accounted for. Daille's wife died down in Indiana, as Daille said, and is buried there. Mr. Wyler divorced his wife twenty years ago, and he died five years later and is buried in Hollyhock Cemetery in Wiston. Mr. Dockett is still alive, living in Cincinnati. He remarried and has seven children. Mr. Loken disappeared eleven years ago and hasn't been seen or heard from since — not until this evening, anyway, except for one finger bone. Would you like to tell us about him, Mrs. Loken?"

Now she was the Sphinx, minus chins, staring straight ahead and not moving a muscle.

Grandfather turned to Mrs. Wyler. "Let's start over again. Instead

of a husky man we have a rather small woman with a heavy husband to dispose of. That's the description the sergeant turned up — a small man, with small hands, but very obese. Daille's house hadn't been built eleven years ago, and Mrs. Loken's only neighbors were Mrs. Wyler, who frequently stayed overnight with her sister, and Mrs. Dockett, who even then was hard of hearing. Maybe Mrs. Loken had the idea of dragging the body to that wood on the other side of the highway, but she quickly found out that she couldn't do it. She made a flowerbed instead."

"So that's why she was so good about tending my flowers," Mrs. Wyler said through clenched teeth.

"Until this year," Grandfather said. "This year her husband was no longer buried there, so she lost interest. Why did you move the body, Mrs. Loken? The dogs? Betsy digging with her little shovel?"

Mrs. Loken had gone ghastly white, and she wasn't saying a thing.

"That's all very well," the Sheriff growled, "but one finger bone still doesn't make much of a corpus delicti."

"Oh, we have the rest of him," Sergeant Reichel said. "He was buried right where Rastin told us to look — at Mrs. Loken's lake cottage, under a flowerbed."

"You told me to do it!" Mrs. Loken shrieked, jumping at Mrs. Wyler. "You said a man like him deserved to be dead!"

They hauled her away, still screaming.

After that the gathering broke up fast, and we were left alone with Mrs. Wyler. She'd aged in those last few minutes until she now looked as old as she actually was, which is a horrible condition for any woman to be in. She said, "I didn't know. I always *talk,* but I never thought of anyone *doing* a thing like that."

"People react to talk in different ways," Grandfather said. "Do you know what happened to Mrs. Daille?"

"No—"

"She'd had a nervous breakdown before they moved here. Her doctor thought a quiet place in the country might be good for her. Because Daille was gone so much of the time he didn't realize what you were doing to her until it was too late. He put her in a private mental hospital down in Indiana — it was expensive, he's still paying for it — and while she was there she committed suicide. He's trying to keep it a secret, for Betsy's sake."

"Men—" she croaked.

We left her.

"She's as much a murderess as Mrs. Loken is," I said, as we were getting into my jalopy.

"Yes," Grandfather agreed, "but the law can't touch her. We'll leave it to her conscience — and hope she has one."

"You already had everything figured out. Why all that fa de la with the Mother Goose rhymes?"

"Reichel hadn't found the body yet, and I wanted to make certain I was right. Did you see Mrs. Loken's face when I first mentioned bones in a flowerbed?"

"No. I was watching Betsy."

"You and Pilkins both. Put him in the room with a murderess and he looks at someone else."

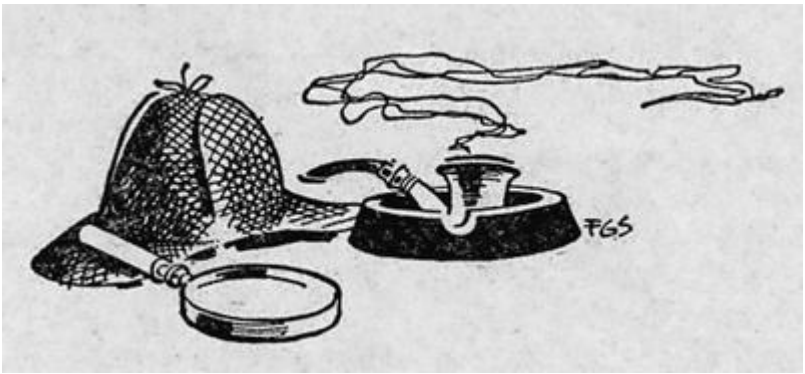
"If you'd told me to watch a murderess, I'd have picked Mrs. Wyler. She looks like one. It was her back yard, too."

Grandfather shook his head. "I knew she wasn't directly involved in this particular murder because she told the truth about Daille's wife. She said Daille took her on a trip and came back without her. She wouldn't have said that if she'd been worried that the police might decide it wasn't Daille's wife they were looking for. You see — she hated Daille's guts, and she really thought he had killed his wife, but *where* he did it wasn't important to her. Where was very important to Mrs. Loken. From her point of view Mrs. Daille had to be killed *here,* to account for the bone. So she lied and said she'd seen Mrs. Daille at home *after* the trip, and that lie gave her away."

"I still think something should be done about Mrs. Wyler," I said. "She's the only woman I ever met who could play a witch without being made up for the part. Isn't there some way to punish her?"

"I think maybe there is," Grandfather said. "It wouldn't be much, but I suppose I'm bound to do what I can."

What he did was persuade Jim Daille to sell his house to three crusty old bachelors. It would be nice to report that Mrs. Wyler mended her ways, dieted off a hundred pounds, and married one of them; but she didn't. She put up with them for all of three weeks, and then she moved away.



Turnabout
by Miriam Allen deFord{© 1971 by Miriam Allen deFord.}

A new crime story by Miriam Allen deFord

The first anonymous phone call to Mrs. Renfrew was bad enough — but it wasn't obscene. The second anonymous phone call was worse than obscene…

❖

The first call was annoying. The second was frightening. They both came in the middle of the morning on a weekday, when Howard was least likely to be there.

"Mrs. Renfrew?" The voice was a woman's, unfamiliar.

"Yes. Who is it?"

"That doesn't matter — a friend. Does the name Lotta mean anything to you?"

"Lotta? No, I don't — do you mean your name is Lotta?"

The caller laughed. "Hardly. Well, Mrs. Renfrew, I think it my duty to warn you. Lotta Corey, your husband's secretary."

"Oh, nonsense," Madge Renfrew said brusquely. "My husband often speaks of his secretary, and he has no personal interest in her whatever. In fact, I believe he told me she had been out of the office all last week because of some kind of heart trouble, and if she couldn't keep up he'd have to replace her."

The woman laughed again, not pleasantly. "Oh, yes, she has heart trouble, all right. In both senses of the word. Well, if you think I'm some jealous female just being catty, I suggest that you find out where *she* was when *he* made that trip to Chicago last month."

"I think you're being offensive," Mrs. Renfrew said coldly. "Goodbye."

Of all the cliché soap-opera situations, she thought angrily. Wait till she reported it to Howard that evening!

But through the afternoon a memory began seeping in. The way she had tried to get Howard at the hotel he told her he'd be staying at, to remind him he must be back in time for the Barretts' dinner on Thursday, and how the hotel clerk had said Howard wasn't registered

there. He could have had a dozen reasons for changing hotels and not have thought of telling her. But—

Their marriage was no great romance; neither of them had ever pretended that. If she hadn't been an heiress, she doubted if he would have married her. She was considerably older, an inch taller, and the best anyone had ever said about her appearance was that she was nice-looking. But they had been getting along well together — had been for 14 years — and he was no gigolo; he worked hard and was prospering in his own right. He was well-born — better than she was — and in earlier days he'd been handsome. They had no children because neither of them wanted any. It was a satisfactory enough marriage, and Madge Renfrew had not the slightest intention of having it broken.

But she did not mention the phone call to Howard that evening.

It was a week later that the second phone call came. This time the voice was a man's.

It began like the other one: "Mrs. Renfrew?"

"Yes, who is calling?"

"Never mind," he said. "Just listen. Mrs. Renfrew, my business is killing people. I am what they call a professional killer."

She was too horrified to speak.

"Perhaps you would like to know that your husband has offered me $10,000 to dispose of you."

"You're insane," she breathed. "Or is this your idea of a crazy joke?"

"No joke. And I'm not insane. I would be, though, if I took up that offer without getting in touch with you first."

"What— why—"

He chuckled unpleasantly.

"I plan my jobs," he said in a matter-of-fact way. "I find out all I can about the subject, to make a good clean job of it. I'm not a common thug, Mrs. Renfrew, and I have a reputation in my field. No case I've handled has ever been suspected of being anything but a natural death."

He sounded proud and businesslike at the same time. Madge Renfrew listened, beyond power of reply.

"So," he went on, "when I cased this assignment I found out something. *You're* the one with the big money — and that gave me an idea. Mrs. Renfrew, how would you like to double the ante and have me knock off your husband instead of you?"

"I — oh, this is ridiculous! I'm going to notify the police."

"Notify them of what? That some loony they can't find called you up and made a crazy proposal to you? Uh-uh. Think it over, lady. One of you is going to die. Which would you rather it be — your husband

or you?"

She sat there silent and shivering.

"Take your time to decide, Mrs. Renfrew," the man said. "I'll call you again about this time tomorrow." He hung up.

Howard didn't come home that evening. Working late, he said. With Lotta? When she heard him come in and go to his own room, long after midnight, she had been lying awake for hours, thinking.

At last she came to a decision. In the morning she would tell Howard about the two calls — no, only about the first one. If he wanted a mistress, she'd tell him, why, all right; just keep it discreet, don't make it public.

She couldn't — nobody could — look him in the face and say aloud, "Somebody says you are paying him $10,000 to have me killed, and if I'll make it $20,000 he'll kill you instead." With no proof but her own word. Howard would take her immediately to a psychiatrist, and any psychiatrist would declare her in need of treatment in a mental hospital. She'd rather be dead than that. Or a widow.

Wait. Wait and see if the man did call again. Then see if she could trap him into some slip that would enable her to tell both Howard and the police about it, and be believed.

So maybe she'd better not bring the subject up yet with Howard at all. Besides, what would be the use? He'd only laugh the accusation away, and then be aware she knew he was having an affair and was keeping quiet about it.

The more she thought about the second caller's melodramatic story, the sillier it sounded. Why on earth should Howard want her dead? Imagine her balding, potbellied husband indulging in dreams of all for love and the world well lost! He knew she'd never divorce him, and in any event he wasn't fool enough to disinherit himself of a really sizable fortune.

Oh. Her thinking came to an abrupt stop. But if she were dead, the thinking resumed shakenly, he'd be rid of her and have his Lotta and the money, too.

Nevertheless, if that man thought she was going to make herself an accessory to a murder — even the murder of an unfaithful husband —

The phone rang.

"Well?" the man's voice said. "Have you made up your mind?"

And as if someone else had suddenly entered into her and was using her as a puppet, she heard herself say calmly, "Yes, I've decided. I'll pay you $20,000 — if you make it another — what did you call it? — another subject."

"The girl?" he asked coolly. So he knew — maybe everyone knew but her. All the better. Howard would stay alive, and stay married to

her. And for the rest of his life he would be tortured by his bereavement, suspicious of the killer whom somehow he had been steered to, suspicious of her but afraid ever again to do anything but suffer.

Perhaps she would tell him then how she discovered he had planned her murder and that if she died before him, how she had given a sealed letter to her lawyer, revealing the facts and asking for a full investigation. Maybe she should have done that after the first call from the hired killer, to forestall any attempt on her life. But that wouldn't have punished them enough. Anyway, it was too late now: she had cast the die.

All this darted through her mind in the split second before she answered calmly, "Yes. Her name is Lotta Corey. She is my husband's secretary."

"Why not?" said the man. "And I want to assure you, Mrs. Renfrew" — his voice took on the tone of an earnest salesman — "I have a reputation for honest dealing, and I value it. I never double-cross my clients. I'll tell Mr. Renfrew at once that I'm turning him down, for reasons of my own, and from this moment on both you and he are entirely safe so far as I am concerned. Once the commission is carried out neither of you will ever hear from me again."

She almost said, "Thank you."

"Now as to details," he went on briskly. "I don't expect to be paid until the job's done. But I have to protect myself and make sure of getting my money. You understand that?"

"What do you mean?"

"I'm going to give you an accommodation address. It will do you no good to inquire there — it's just one of those places that receive mail to be called for, and they know nothing whatever about me. I'm going to dictate a short note to you, and you're going to write it by hand and sign it and send it to William J. Smith at that address. That's the name they'll know me by — they expect phony names."

"What kind of note?"

"Just a simple statement," he said blandly, "that you, Madge Renfrew, are hiring me for $20,000 in cash to eliminate Lotta Corey."

"I will not!" she screamed. "Why, that would make me an accessory to murder!"

"Precisely. It protects me against any attempt by you to investigate me. I will give the note back to you the day after you have proof of Miss Corey's death, in exchange for $20,000 in used $50 bills, not numbered in sequence."

"No, no!" she cried frantically. "The whole thing's off."

"I'd be sorry for that," he said. "Your husband was more sensible. He agreed at once to send the note when I told him to. So if you

renege I'll just have to inform him I'll go ahead."

She thought hard and furiously.

"Tell me how the note should read," she choked at last.

"Now that's more reasonable. Get paper and a pen."

Her hand shaking, she wrote the few lines.

"I won't waste any time," the man went on. "It will take a few days to complete my strategy. Then I'll call you to have you send me the note. Two or three days later look at the obituary column in the morning newspaper. The day after that I'll give you instructions for getting the money to me."

She heard the click as he hung up. She had always known instinctively that his calls came from public booths.

That was Friday. On Monday he called, said curtly, "Mail the note," and hung up. She began reading the obituary page of the paper. On Thursday she found a brief notice:

> **COREY — Lotta.** Suddenly, in this city, on May 18, Lotta Corey, daughter of the late Richard and Aileen Corey, aged 24, a native of Cleveland. O. Funeral services and inurnment in Cleveland. Memorial gifts to your favorite charity preferred.

Howard was out of town. She did not have to pretend curiosity or interest.

The next day the man who called himself William J. Smith phoned again. She had drawn the money from three separate accounts, to avoid comment. The 400 bills fitted neatly into a small suitcase. According to instructions, she put it in a locker at the bus terminal.

She was tempted to sit there and wait till he came. But when would that be, and what good would it do? He probably had followed her at one time or another and now knew her by sight; and in any case he would not approach the locker until he had the key. She mailed it to him — what else could she do? She was at his mercy.

As he had said, he was honest. By return mail her note came back to her; she burned it immediately. She was even sure he had not had it copied; it would be of no use to him now without implicating himself.

That night, in a motel several hundred miles away, Howard Renfrew and Lotta Corey drank champagne to celebrate.

"I just can't believe it, Howie!" she exulted. "It sounded so crazy, but you got away with it! How you got that notice into the paper I'll never understand."

"Simple," he said complacently. "I just mailed the money and told them to run it on a certain date. I said you had no relatives here and

as your employer I was taking care of things. Of course, honey, you realize that from now on Lotta Corey is dead. What did you say when you moved out of that rooming-house?"

"Like you told me, I told the landlady I was having trouble with my heart again — she knew about that time I thought it was a heart attack for sure, but it turned out to be only indigestion — so I was going back home for treatment by my doctor there."

"Fine. And you haven't lived here long enough to have made friends who'd be likely to investigate your disappearance. And now under the new name you can afford a decent apartment in another part of town, and things are going to be a lot easier for both of us."

"I'll say! And you're really putting the whole $20,000 in my name?"

"Why not, sweetie? After all, you made that first call, finking on yourself! You've earned it."

"In the office and out," she smiled. "Oh, look, Howie, we forgot — it's $19,000. You have to pay $1000, don't you, to that unemployed actor who made the phone calls from your script?"

"Oh, yeah. He was pretty good, wasn't he?"

"He worries me," said Lotta, frowning. "What's to keep him from talking?"

"Talking where? He must guess something, but suppose he goes to the fuzz. What can he do to me that wouldn't involve him in a charge of extortion — to say nothing of agreeing to be a murderer?"

"Oh, I see, Howie. You're so smart!"

Howard Renfrew looked at her meditatively. She was lots of fun, and without her he didn't know how he could have endured his dreary marriage any longer. But $19,000 wasn't going to last forever, and heaven knew how many years more he must wait and hope that Madge would die before him — she had ten years on him at least, in his opinion — and make him a millionaire.

Well, when he came to that bridge, he'd cross it. He'd think of something.

Lotta gazed equally meditatively back at him. $19,000 was a nice bit of money. But Howie really was going to seed, and a young pretty girl could do better than that for herself now that she had enough to buy new clothes and things. Set herself up without having to work, for one thing. Or maybe some day she could make a nice nest egg for herself by threatening to snitch. *She* hadn't been involved in any plot. Well, time enough ahead to make plans about that.

She refilled their glasses.

No Time to Lose
by David Ely{©1971 by David Ely.}

A new story by David Ely

You are probably familiar with David Ely's work through his novels — TROT, SECONDS, THE TOUR, *and* POOR DEVILS. *His short stories are often tales of horror and the macabre, of terror and gripping suspense, of irony and sardonic humor. Here is David Ely's newest, and as you will discover, it projects, in a single short story, all these qualities…*

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He had heard rumors that such places existed, and he had assumed that the rumors were true, for experience had taught him that every human demand would somehow find a source of supply, no matter how difficult or outrageous the demand might be.

And yet he never would have imagined that he himself would be involved in it. He was badly frightened. He knew he might be making a terrible mistake, that he might be on his way to death, not life — and although he was not a religious man he moved his lips in prayer as he sat shivering and perspiring, and all the time he was aware of the dull erratic movements of his heart.

"How much longer?" he asked the driver.

"One more hour, Mr. Kipp."

The car was moving at moderate speed, for the road was steep, narrow, and dangerously pitted. The moon cast a treacherous light; it made the landscape seem gentle. It wasn't, though. Mr. Kipp knew that it was a harsh, rough devil of mountainous upcountry, scarred with deep ravines, its cliffs so baked by sun and scoured by cloudbursts that no living things could grow except for bitter grass and a few stunted scrubby trees. And, of course, the cactus — cactus everywhere, giant plants that seemed to leap up like sentinels as the headlights swept them.

Mr. Kipp shrank back in his seat. Those stiff vegetable figures with upraised arms might be warning him — *go back, go back* — and yet, ambiguously, they pointed to the heavens, which meant the freedom of eternity — and also death everlasting.

He sought to avoid such thoughts by conversing with the driver. "You must be used to this trip," he said.

"I've done it before, Mr. Kipp."

"But surely the bulk of your supplies and equipment can't be brought in on a road like this."

"It comes air freight," the driver replied. He was a short swarthy man whose careful English betrayed only a slight accent. "There's a little landing pad for helicopters, Mr. Kipp."

"I see."

Mr. Kipp reflected that it would have been far more comfortable for him to have come by helicopter, but he supposed that it would have been more difficult to keep his arrival secret that way. They had insisted on secrecy, and he had been so desperate, so driven by panic, that he had obeyed without question, even though his animal sense of security protested against being so completely cut off.

He had flown to Mexico City two weeks ago. Then, following the instructions given at every stage, he had traveled south from town to town, from one hotel to the next, establishing himself as a vacationing businessman with a leisurely interest in church architecture but with no particular schedule or itinerary, except that his course was south, always south.

And now he was far to the north. If something went wrong he could never be traced. The authorities, when finally notified by his family to search for him, would look fruitlessly in Oaxaca and Chiapas and perhaps as far as Yucatan, until, in time, he would be listed as missing, presumed dead. There would be nothing whatever to connect his disappearance with the private estate of Dr. Benavides in the rough wilderness of Durango, hundreds of miles to the north.

The car struck a pothole, swerved, and skidded to the edge of the road. Mr. Kipp moaned and clenched his fists, waiting for the fall — but the driver managed the skid quite nicely, and Mr. Kipp's hands soon stopped trembling enough to open the little bottle he kept in his coat pocket. He took out a tranquillizer pill, put it in his mouth, and swallowed it, dry.

"Oh, God," he prayed again, silently. "Pull me through this one, God."

He thought of the ether and the knife, and he thought, too, of his heart, laboring fitfully, and in his anguish he cursed its weakness. How bitter it was to have struggled up in life as he had, to have overcome so many enemies and obstacles — and now, still youthful at the age of 50, to find that it could end forever for him at any moment.

"I'll give you everything I've got, God," prayed Mr. Kipp, as though the operation were to be performed by some priest or bishop, instead of by the cashiered Army surgeon, Benavides. "Everything, God. I swear it." But Mr. Kipp, a creature of habit, sensed that he was making a sort of contract, the terms of which were perhaps

unnecessarily generous, and so he amended it somewhat. “All I want is a little comfort, God. Maybe fifty thousand a year. The rest I don’t care about, God. I’ll give it to the church, to charities, whatever you want, God.”

He felt a little better. The pretense of making a deal with God had fleetingly called into play that complex of instincts which in Mr. Kipp had been developed into an instrument of great subtlety and force. He had a gift for deals, no doubt about it. Over the years he had tumbled many a business rival — the little ones at first, and then, as he prospered, the bigger ones as well. Mr. Kipp reflected with melancholy satisfaction on his most recent triumph (just before he’d got the news about his heart) when he’d managed to defeat Gorgos himself, the biggest of all. It had been a question of having the right amount of liquid capital available at the right time, that was all — and, of course, knowing what to do with it.

Mr. Kipp smiled. Yes, old Gorgos had been furious. He hadn’t really been hurt — he was far too rich and powerful to be troubled by any single loss — but his pride had been affronted, that was clear. To be outbid by an upstart like Kipp!

But Mr. Kipp’s retrospective enjoyment of his victory was short-lived, for, thinking of Gorgos, he remembered the rumors he’d heard at the time that the old mail, so passionately attached to life, also was being betrayed by his own body — the kidneys, so it was said — which might have distracted his attention at the critical moment in the deal.

Mr. Kipp shuddered. His own heart trouble, surely that was worse. He had gone to the top specialists in the best clinics and hospitals, and everywhere it had been the same story. “You may live for years,” they all had told him. “You’ve got to cut down on everything, of course, but there’s no reason why you can’t, is there?”

No, he couldn’t accept that. He wasn’t cut out to live a half life. For him it had to be all or nothing — and besides, it was worse than they thought, he knew it was worse; he could tell that the very fibers of that wretched heart of his were rotting, rotting, and all they wanted him to do was lie on a sofa and die by degrees.

Far up ahead in the darkness beyond the reach of the car’s headlamps he saw the gleam of light.

“Is that it, there?” he asked.

“That’s it, Mr. Kipp.”

Mr. Kipp tried to compose himself, but he was excited, apprehensive, and also quite fatigued by his long journey. He kept asking himself: *Will it work? Will it work?* And he felt his courage ebb so that he almost decided not to go through with it, and then he thought again of the certain death that lay within him, and he knew

that he had no choice but to proceed.

The lights from the Benavides estate grew brighter. It was a large establishment, for Benavides had grown rich in his profession and could afford the finest horses and cattle, with the irrigated pastureland that fed them in fine style, as well as the most modem living and working accommodations for himself and his staff. There were vineyards and orchards and vegetable gardens, too, and the peasants who labored in these fields lived in a cluster of huts near the south entrance to the estate.

Mr. Kipp was acquainted with these matters from his conversations in New York with an acquaintance, Costain, who'd gone through successfully what he himself now was about, to begin. Costain, too, had first tried to make arrangements at every major hospital in the States equipped for such operations, and, like Kipp, he had been turned down — or, more precisely, he had been told he'd have to take his place at the bottom of an interminable waiting list.

Those famous surgeons were impervious to bribes, for they had plenty of money; besides, they were the newest heroes of the age, they had become demigods, lifegivers, and for the sake of their incredible prestige, they thought nothing of spuming the desperate offers of wealthy men. Costain, in despair, had thought of organizing a new hospital which would recognize the special claims of affluence — and then he had learned that such a place already existed, south of the Rio Grande.

"A two-months' vacation in Mexico, that's all it amounts to," Costain had told Kipp. "Then you go back every few months for a checkup."

Of course it amounted to a little more than that. The cost was staggering, naturally, but Mr. Kipp, with his shrewd dealer's eye, had arranged matters so that he would not pay a premium for failure. One-half of the fee was being held in escrow in New York, to be disbursed only on his return to that city. He had felt much encouraged when Benavides' agent accepted these terms, because it indicated that the good doctor had considerable confidence in the outcome.

The car was moving rapidly toward the estate now, for here the road was straight. They passed the peasant huts, in which lanterns dimly glowed, and Mr. Kipp, hearing the chatter and laughter of family life, was suddenly troubled by certain disquieting thoughts, and he was forced to compose his mind with severe effort. No good thinking about *that*, he told himself angrily.

Still, he could hardly help it. Everything seemed to conspire to bring it to mind. Once within the estate they passed the barns, one of which was brightly lighted, with its great doors swung wide, and although Mr. Kipp sought to fasten his attention on the truly

magnificent beasts he glimpsed — cattle and pigs — he was unable to avoid noticing three or four young workmen gathered there. One glance was enough — yes, they were sturdy fellows in the youthful prime of life, bursting with energy and good spirits, who doubtless hadn't been ill a day in their lives — absolutely perfect human specimens.

Dr. Benavides must certainly be a model employer, Mr. Kipp reflected. These people ordinarily would live a life of deprivation, of near-starvation; in fact, they'd be better off dead, most of them — but under Dr. Benavides they had plenty to eat and prompt medical attention in case they were ever ill, and if — as he supposed, although Costain had delicately skirted this question — if now and then one of them met with some unfortunate accident… well, that wasn't too terrible a price to pay, was it, so that the little community as a whole could prosper?

No, no, not at all, thought Mr. Kipp, and he conceived of these young workers as being heroes — even if it was not exactly voluntary or conscious heroism — and since he himself would be connected with their heroism and spirit of sacrifice, he felt tears of sympathy force their way into his eyes. Yes, he managed to tell himself, he had come down from New York not entirely selfishly, for he was a necessary part of a basically benevolent system which had raised the standard of living of these poor people—

His thoughts were cut short. They had arrived at the main building.

The car door swung open.

"Mr. Kipp?"

Dr. Benavides himself had come out to meet him and to escort him inside.

Mr. Kipp was terribly weary from his trip, and his mind was bemused by the thoughts he had lately sustained in it, so that he was not fully aware of what was taking place. He was given a tot of brandy, he shook hands with several of the staff doctors, and then he was conducted to a huge bathroom where skillful attendants helped him undress and then bathed him thoroughly.

Now for bed, thought Mr. Kipp distractedly, but he was wrong.

Instead, he was taken directly into a huge operating room, helped up on one of the tables, and strapped neatly down.

"You're going to do it right away?" he asked, in some alarm, as Dr. Benavides appeared again, clothed in his surgeon's greens.

"No time to lose, Mr. Kipp," Dr. Benavides replied cheerfully. "No time at all." He began giving orders to various staff members, who moved with quiet competence here and there, readying the equipment, including that of the anesthesiologist, which was brought

to the head of Mr. Kipp's table.

Then the doors were opened. A stretcher was wheeled rapidly in and placed alongside Mr. Kipp. On the stretcher was a body — and although Mr. Kipp didn't want to look at it, although he strove with all his might to avoid looking at it, he couldn't help himself. He turned his head.

But it wasn't a young man. Mr. Kipp saw the protruding belly of age, white tufts of hair on the wrinkled chest, and the wattled neck.

Mr. Kipp felt outraged. "That man is *old*," he protested, struggling ineffectively against his straps.

And then he glanced at the face of his neighbor, and he realized that his supposition about the function of the youthful peasants was quite unfounded, and he also realized more fully why Dr. Benavides and his associates had been so insistent that he leave no traces whatever that might lead the authorities north to Durango.

The old man on the stretcher was well known to him. It was, in fact, Gorgos, who was regarding him with a rather wicked grin.

"Thanks for the kidneys, Kipp," said Gorgos. "This time, I outbid *you*."

Dr. Benavides smiled benignly down. "You're the donor in this case, Mr. Kipp," he explained.

And then the anesthetic mask was applied, quite firmly, to Mr. Kipp's face.

Mouse in a Trap
by Michael Gilbert{©1970 by Michael Gilbert.}

First magazine publication in the United States

The legal firm of Messrs. Lamplough, Fairchild and Brett found itself enmeshed in a little real-estate deal involving two of its valued clients. And the final resolution of the problem was — how do the lawyers say it? — "entirely without prejudice"…

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When two people fall out and decide to seek legal advice over their dispute it may seem surprising to you that they should both go to the same firm of solicitors. It is only superficially surprising. For, if both of them have used the same firm for a long time, neither may see any reason why he should go elsewhere to oblige the other party. After all, they can always consult different partners. And anyway, in a small country town, there may only *be* one good firm. This explains why the offices of Messrs. Lamplough, Fairchild and Brett recently received visits, on successive mornings, both from Mr. Snuggs and Sir Charles Pellat.

These offices occupy an early Georgian building in the little Square behind the Corn-market. The brass plate is so worn with age and elbow grease that the names on it are almost illegible. No one living can remember Mr. Lamplough. There is a portrait of him in the waiting room which exhibits a crop of benevolent mutton-chop whiskers. If you look very closely you can see the rat-trap mouth behind them.

Mr. Cyprian Fairchild, the senior partner, is the grandson of the original Fairchild, and is himself approaching the age of retirement. Older clients value his advice. They realize that he may not be entirely *au fait* with the complexities of modern legislation, but they look on him as an old friend and a man of the world. The younger generation of lawyers in the office, headed by the junior partner, Mr. Roger Brett, privately consider him an old fuddy-duddy.

Mr. Snuggs parked his brand-new Three Litre Austin across the backs of two smaller cars, neatly blocking their exit, entered the office

with the deliberate tread which befitted an independent tradesman and a man of property, and was shown up to the second-floor room of young Mr. Brett.

"It's the roof, at the front," said Mr. Snuggs. "Not the new bit over the back extension. That's perfect and will be for another fifty years."

"It should be," said Mr. Brett, "seeing what it cost your landlord to put it up."

"He can afford it," said Mr. Snuggs. "No. It's the front bit. Two tiles off in the gale last week, and Alfred and Henry ran a ladder up yesterday and stripped off a few more tiles. We found just what we expected. Wet rot."

Mr. Brett said, "Tchk tchk," and made a note. He reflected that it was the fourth such discovery that Mr. Snuggs and his sons had made in the past few years. The others had been dry rot, rising damp, and wood-worm. All had been rectified at considerable expense, by their long-suffering landlord, Sir Charles Pellat.

"Did you mention it to Sir Charles?"

"I did."

"I don't suppose he was pleased."

"He was upset," said Mr. Snuggs complacently. "But I told him, it's your property. You've got to keep it in repair. Roof and main timbers. That's what the lease says, isn't it?"

"That's roughly correct. Of course, he did build on that rear extension for you three years ago. That was an improvement. He didn't *have* to do that."

"He was improving his own property. It'll come back to him when we go. He may not get it himself — he's an old man. But it'll come back to his family, won't it?"

"That's roughly correct."

"Then he's just investing his own money in his own property."

"That's certainly one way of looking at it," said Mr. Brett. "Did he agree to make the repairs?"

"What he said was, seeing as me and my two boys were all builders, why didn't we do it ourselves. Well, I wasn't falling for that! I said, we don't mix business with pleasure, Sir Charles. We'd rather get an outside firm to do it, then we'd know the job would be done properly. I suggested Palmer's."

Mr. Brett made another note. He knew that Palmer's were the most expensive builders in the district. He didn't think that Sir Charles would be very pleased. He fancied he would be seeing him quite soon.

This prediction was promptly fulfilled. At eleven o'clock on the following morning an aged Rolls-Royce pulled into the Square and parked across the backs of three smaller cars.

Sir Charles was tall and thin. He still retained, in his walk and his

talk, a ghost of the cavalry subaltern he had been in the first World War. He refused a seat, and stood beside the fine bow-window of Mr. Cyprian Fairchild's ground-floor office.

"It's that damned fellow Snuggs," he said.

"At it again, is he?"

"He never stops. Why the devil I ever let him have the lodge I don't know!"

"When your lodgekeeper left, you had to let it to someone."

"Should have chosen an old lady. A nice old lady. Not a bounder like Snuggs."

"You couldn't tell."

"Might have known. Fellow's a builder. Bound to be a crook. They all are."

"That's a bit sweeping," said Mr. Fairchild. "There are honest builders. You happen to have struck a bad 'un, that's all. What does he want now?"

"He wants a new front roof. Cost five hundred pounds. Got the estimate here."

"How much did you pay for that back extension?"

"Fifteen hundred. That was three years ago. Cost more now. And that's on top of what I paid for rebuilding the whole chimney and putting in new casement windows downstairs. To say nothing of regular annual repairs. I calculated the other day" — Sir Charles fished a scrap of paper out of his waistcoat pocket — "that lodge has cost me the thick end of five thousand pounds since the Snuggses went in."

"I suppose it's an investment," said Mr. Fairchild gloomily.

"Investment! Who for? Me? I've got no heir, apart from my sister Lucretia, and she's got all the money she wants. And anyway, what sort of investment is it for God's sake? The place must be the best fitted-out cottage in England by now. Worth eight thousand pounds at least. If I had that money invested I'd get — never was much good at sums."

"At six per cent you'd get four hundred and eighty pounds a year."

"And the rent I get is thirty-five shillings a week. How much is that a year?"

"Just over ninety pounds."

"Well, there you are," said Sir Charles. He glowered out of the window at a lady driver who was trying with little success to back her car out past his Rolls-Royce.

"The trouble is," said Mr. Fairchild, "that *if* you want to sell the Manor House, and I gather you've more or less made up your mind—"

"Got to. Can't keep it up. Barn of a place. Far too big."

"The park's leased to an agricultural tenant. So the rent of that is regulated. And the lodge is the only cottage left. If you'd been able to give vacant possession of that, it would have been a great attraction. I wonder if we could buy the Snuggses out."

"They wouldn't leave," said Sir Charles. He was staring gloomily out of the window. The woman driver had abandoned the attempt and started blowing her horn. Sir Charles ignored her. He swung round suddenly and said, "Do you suppose he'd do a swap?"

Mr. Fairchild gaped at him.

"Do a *what?"* he said.

"A swap. An exchange. I'll take the lodge. He can have the Manor House. *And* the park."

"He can't mean it," said young Mr. Brett.

"He's quite serious. He reckons he'd be much better off in the lodge. He'll be able to save his income instead of spending it trying to keep up the Manor. And he'll be much warmer in winter."

"But what will the Snugges *do* with the Manor House?"

"They're builders, aren't they? Plenty of scope for them."

"It's mad," said Mr. Brett. "But all the same—"

"Squire Snuggs," said Mr. Fairchild with a chuckle. "Think how he'll enjoy that. There are one or two details. Sir Charles would like to keep the shooting. And there's one particularly nice walk, up the beech avenue to that summerhouse — a gazebo is the correct name for it, I believe — he'd like to keep alright of way up to that. I'll leave the conveyancing details to you, my boy. It shouldn't take very long to fix up."

It took a month to fix up. And Mr. Snuggs seemed happy with the exchange for nearly a year. At the end of that time he called by appointment to see Mr. Brett, and brought his two sons with him, solid youths who sat on the edges of their chairs holding their hats in their hands. Mr. Snuggs did most of the talking.

"It's like this," he said, "I want to put things back to what they was before."

"You mean you want to re-exchange the properties?"

"That's right. I want to put it back like it was." His two sons nodded their somber approval.

"But why?"

"Because it won't work. First, we get no money out of it. What that farmer chap pays us goes on *his* improvements, and anything that's left goes on rates. Do you know how much the rates are on the Manor?"

"I know," said Mr. Brett, "and so do you. Because I told you when you bought it."

"Well, you may have told me, but I didn't take it in. Then there's the repairs. All right, we do them ourselves. But it's bloody hard work —" His two sons nodded emphatically. It was clear to Mr. Brett that most of the hard work was done by them. *"And* it means we can't take on much outside work, so we've got no money coming in. And last but not least, there's the lodge."

"Ah," said Mr. Brett. "The lodge. Yes?"

"Twice already this year he's been at us for money. First it was all the gutters wanted re-doing. Three hundred pounds that cost us. I offered to do it myself."

"What did he say to that?"

"He said he didn't like to see us mixing business with pleasure. He'd get Palmer's to do it."

"Aren't they apt to be a bit expensive?"

"Expensive! They build their houses with bricks of gold. Then there was the drains. *We* never found anything wrong with the drains, did we?"

Alfred and Henry shook their heads in unison.

"There was a surveyor's report. I remember."

"Oh, yes. He got a surveyor's report all right. Six hundred pounds that cost us. And what are we getting for it? I'll tell you." Mr. Snuggs thumped the table with a large mahogany fist. "Ninety pounds a year, and everyone laughing at us. Why, we can't hardly get in our own gate for the bloody great cars round *his* front door. *And* he's bought himself a new Aston-Martin."

"It's true," said Sir Charles to Mr. Fairchild, "that I do seem to have become a lot more popular since I moved. In the old days no one seemed keen on coming to dinner with me. I couldn't blame them really. When I had guests we used to eat in the big dining room — the one my grandparents used when they had a royal visitation. It's got three outside walls, and the central heating system at the Manor is so old-fashioned that although it used a ton of coke a week the pipes never got more than lukewarm. I remember once when I had old Colonel Featherstonehaugh to dinner he took a sip of his burgundy — rather a nice Corton, incidentally — and said, his teeth chattering at the time, "You know, Charles, the only w-w-way you could get this w-w-wine down to room temperature would be to put a l-l-lump of ice in it." Sir Charles laughed heartily, and Mr. Fairchild laughed with him.

"So you're better off now?"

"Oh, we're very snug now. The gas-fired central heating keeps the cottage as warm as toast. Of course, I had to pay for the boiler, but I stung my landlord for all the builders' work involved. And what's more, now that I don't need the cellar for coal, I've got most of my

wine into it. I wonder, would you care to come up next week and try the Clos de Vougeot? It's settled nicely."

"I'd love to," said Mr. Fairchild.

Pride, plus a determination not to be proved wrong, enabled Mr. Snuggs to stick it out for another twelve months. Then his Austin, two years old now and in sad need of a re-spray, crept into the little Square behind the Corn-market. Mr. Snuggs looked almost as battered as his car. He said to Mr. Brett, "It's no good. It's killing me. Something's got to be done."

"It's got worse, has it?"

"Worse? If it goes on for another six months I'll be bankrupt. And every time I go out of my own front gate I can see that old devil. He sits in his front window all the time, grinning at me. Except when he takes a stroll up to the summerhouse, and sits there grinning at all of us. We've got to stop it."

Mr. Brett nearly said, "There's no law against grinning," and then realized that with Mr. Snuggs in his present frame of mind this might cost him a valuable client. He said, "It's not going to be easy."

"Couldn't we raise his rent?"

"It's a controlled rent. I remember explaining it to you when—"

"Yes, yes," said Mr. Snuggs testily. "You've no call to remind me about that. But I recollect there was something about rates."

"The taxable value."

"If it goes up above a certain figure you can get him out. That's right, isn't it?"

"That's roughly correct."

"It's a lovely little cottage. In a beautiful state of repair. Modem drainage. Central heating."

"I seem to remember," said Mr. Brett, "that my partner, Mr. Fairchild, argued all those points most persuasively in front of the rating authority, but between us we succeeded in defeating him."

Mr. Snuggs said, "Tchah," and then, "You're a lawyer, aren't you? Why don't you suggest something instead of just sitting there making remarks?"

"Sir Charles is pretty old. And I heard he hasn't been very well lately."

"I believe that's right," said Mr. Snuggs, looking more cheerful. "His sister's come to look after him. And I saw the doctor's car up there two days ago. Why?"

"A protected tenancy is a personal thing. Not something he can leave to his family—"

"You mean, if he popped off I'd get the cottage back?"

"That's roughly correct."

It was on a Monday morning in January, sharp with the first frost of the new year, that Mr. Fairchild came into Mr. Brett's room with the news.

"It happened sometime last night," he said. "The old boy must have gone for his usual walk up to the gazebo and had a stroke when he got there."

"A fatal stroke?"

"Dr. Shuttleworth says no. It probably paralyzed him. By a damnable piece of bad luck his sister was out on one of her do-gooding committees and didn't get home till quite late. She assumed he'd already gone to bed. It wasn't until she went to call him this morning that the alarm was sounded. They searched the grounds and found him."

"Then he died of exposure, sometime during the night?"

"Probably quite quickly, Dr. Shuttleworth says. After a stroke his vitality would be very low."

"Poor old chap," said Mr. Brett.

Mr. Snuggs, who called on the following day, expressed somewhat different sentiments.

"We've all got to go sometime," he said, concealing any grief he may have felt. "I expect it was as good a way as any. Doctors nowadays keep old people living far too long. If it's right he was paralyzed, he wouldn't have enjoyed life, would he? A misery to himself and everyone else."

"I suppose that's right," said Mr. Brett.

"Person I feel most sorry for is that sister of his. She'll have to find somewhere to live. She gave up her own house, you know, when she came to look after him, in the summer. Something wrong?"

"In the summer?" croaked Mr. Brett.

"That's right. Have I said something I shouldn't?"

"Do you — do you happen to remember exactly when?"

"As a matter of fact, I do. It was on Midsummer Day. Longest day of the year. I remember remarking on it to Henry. Look here, Brett, what's all this about?"

"And she's been living at the lodge ever since?"

"That's right. Like I said, he needed a bit of looking after at the end."

"And if she came on Midsummer Day she's been there more than six months."

"So what?"

Mr. Brett was thumbing feverishly through the stout olive-green book on his desk.

"It's one of the earlier Rent Acts," he said. "The Act of 1920.

Section Twelve. That's right. Subsection One. I'd entirely overlooked the possibility — yes, yes."

"Stop all this monkey talk," said Mr. Snuggs, his face a bright red, "and explain."

Mr. Brett explained.

"You mean," said Mr. Snuggs, when he had finally taken it in, "that because she's a relative, and because she's lived there more than six months, I can't turn *her* out either."

"That's roughly correct."

A gleam of hope appeared in Mr. Snuggs's watery eyes. "Perhaps she don't know about this old Act," he said.

"It's a possibility. But when I saw her coming out of Mr. Fairchild's room this morning I remember thinking she looked remarkably cheerful."

"Perhaps if I offered her something—"

"You could try," said Mr. Brett.

Brett had only met Miss Pellat once, but she had struck him as a remarkably tough character.

Mr. Snuggs tried that afternoon. He found Miss Lucretia Pellat in the small but nicely furnished front room of the lodge, pouring tea from a heavy old silver pot. He refused the offer of a cup for himself and opened his proposal.

Miss Pellat shook her head. She shook it so emphatically her long jade earrings tinkled.

"I wouldn't dream of moving," she said. "It's a dear little house. Full of memories of the happy times my dear brother had here. He *was* happy, you know."

"I daresay he was," said Mr. Snuggs morosely.

"He kept his health to the last. When providence delivered that final stroke I could not help thinking that it was a perfect ending. Provided—" and on the word Miss Pellat leaned forward so sharply that her earrings tinkled again — "provided that it killed him."

"Well, it did," said Mr. Snuggs.

"That's not true. It was the night in the open that killed him. If I had summoned help and had him carried back to the house — taken to a hospital or nursing home — and injected with drugs, no doubt he could have been saved. And saved for what? A pitiful, half-paralyzed old age. Like a mouse, caught by its back legs in a trap. I knew my brother too well to think he'd have wanted that."

Mr. Snuggs had got his breath back by now. He said, "Do you mean to say you were with him when it happened and you just left him there to die?"

"Death by exposure is quick and not too uncomfortable. If you read the diaries of the great Polar explorers you will find that it comes

with a feeling of warmth and relaxation."

Mr. Snuggs stared at her, horrified. "But," he said, "you're his sister! How could you do it? Walk off like that and leave him!"

"I didn't walk straight off," said Miss Pellat, and her voice sounded a clear warning.

"You didn't, eh?"

"Because, when I'd only got as far as the edge of the wood, I heard a car coming. Your car, Mr. Snuggs."

Mr. Snuggs stared at her, hypnotized.

"And I saw you get out and walk over and look at my brother. And I saw *you* walk away again."

There was a long, long silence. At last Mr. Snuggs said, in a croaking voice, "I deny it."

"Of course you do. And everything I told you is entirely — what do the lawyers say? — without prejudice. Such a curious expression. No, no, I am sure we can keep each other's little secret, Mr. Snuggs."

As he rose heavily to his feet she added, "By the way, I fear I shall have to ask you to do something about the bath. I really need a new one. And while you're at it you might let me have a new sink as well —"